

Intel sharing at heart of US, Europe talks on laptop ban

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In this Aug. 11, 2006 file photo, passengers en route to London check in at Biarritz airport, southwestern France. U.S. and European officials will discuss Wednesday, May 17, 2017, plans to broaden a U.S. ban on in-flight laptops and tablets to include planes from Europe. (AP Photo/Bob Edme, File)

The intelligence behind plans to broaden a U.S. ban on in-flight laptops and tablets to include planes from Europe took center stage on Wednesday as American and European officials met to discuss the

looming decision.

The White House has defended the decision by U.S. President Donald Trump to discuss with Russian officials an Islamic State group terror threat related to the use of laptops on aircraft. European Union officials say they have not been briefed on the threat.

The goal of Wednesday's talks is to "create a consultation, create a sharing of information," said an EU diplomat, who spoke only on condition of anonymity because the talks were ongoing.

Banning large electronics would create logistical chaos on the world's busiest corridor of air travel—as many as 65 million people a year travel between Europe and North American on nearly 400 daily flights, many of them business travelers who rely on the devices to work during the flight.

The ban would dwarf in size the current one, which was put in place in March and affects about 50 flights per day from 10 cities, mostly in the Middle East.

The International Air Transport Association, which represents 265 airlines, on Tuesday wrote to both the EU and the U.S. Department to oppose the proposed ban, which it said would deeply affect the economy and cause the equivalent of \$1.1 billion in lost time to passengers.

There is also the question of the relative safety of keeping in the cargo area a large number of electronics with lithium batteries, which have been known to catch fire. The association proposed more in-depth pre-flight screening, rather than forcing passengers to give up their electronics.

Nonetheless, airlines have said it is merely a matter of time before the

ban is put in place, but the prospect has alarmed officials in the European Union, who want to know more about any new threats and the disruption such a move would create.

Experts say a bomb in the cabin would be easier to make and require less explosive force than one in the cargo hold. Baggage in cargo usually goes through a more sophisticated screening process than carry-on bags.

The original ban on mostly Middle Eastern flights, which Britain also partially adopted and is being considered by Australia, focused on certain countries because their equipment to screen carry-on bags is not as effective as machines in the U.S., analysts say.

Officials from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security met last week with high-ranking executives of the three leading U.S. airlines—American, Delta and United—and the industry's leading U.S. trade group to discuss expanding the laptop policy to flights arriving from Europe.

The airlines still hope to have a say in how the policy is put into effect at airports to minimize inconvenience to passengers. The initial ban on passengers bringing large electronics devices into the cabin hit hardest at Middle Eastern airlines.

Emirates, the Middle East's largest airline, this month cited the ban on electronics as one of the reasons for an 80 percent drop in profits last year. It said the ban had a direct impact on demand for air travel into the U.S. and it faced rising costs from introducing complimentary laptop loans to some passengers.

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