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LAPTOPS:
CONTROL, ALT OR DELETE?
by Philip Baum

I have no doubt that there is sufficient intelligence out there to warrant concern over laptop computers or iPads concealing, and/or their lithium batteries being adapted to initiate, improvised explosive devices. Actually, we didn't even need the intel. It has long been public knowledge that the device that detonated on board Daallo Airlines flight 159 in February 2016 was concealed within a laptop and was probably activated by a passenger who had been given the device after he had gone through the screening checkpoint at Mogadishu Airport…by an airport insider.

Meanwhile, the intelligence community is worthy of praise for the number of plots that they have identified and for safeguarding the societies we live in. The aviation industry owes a debt of thanks to those individuals who interrupted the liquid explosive plot of 2006 and, in 2010, provided the very specific information that printers had been shipped from Yemen to the United States, via UPS and FedEx consignments, containing IEDs (concealed, as we later discovered, within the printer toner cartridges). These are just a few examples of the endeavours which have made aviation safer; there are plenty more 'finds' rightly hidden from the public.

When governments, or their security services, receive threat information, they have a duty to put in place measures that better protect us. It is often a thankless task where measures are implemented without those who design them being able to explain their rationale in any detail. All they can say is that, based on the information available, additional safeguards – often described as being proportionate in nature – are a necessity.

The restrictions introduced by the United States and United Kingdom governments on the carriage of laptops, and other devices, on flights from certain states (the list of items and countries varying either side of the Atlantic) must, one would hope, be based on increasing concern that additional modified devices are in circulation. That, I fear, is where the 'intelligence' process ends. The actual measures themselves defy common sense.

The best lesson the past has taught us is that next time it will be different. Each major bombing - or attempted bombing – this century has utilised a different way of infiltrating the device on board: shoes, underpants, liquids, printer toner cartridges, and, of course, laptops. Our aviation security system must be designed in such a way as to identify future attack scenarios.

There are numerous reasons why flights might be safer from a modified laptop, containing an IED, if it is in checked luggage rather than carry-on: the passenger is not able to initiate the

"abject failure to adopt a risk-based approach to screening"

device using a traditional control mechanism; the device is less likely to find itself next to the aircraft's fuselage and, therefore, any blast may be absorbed by the surrounding baggage and cargo (the Daallo bomb did not, due to the aircraft's low altitude at the time of detonation, cause the destruction of the airliner even though it was activated in a window seat near the fuel tanks); checked luggage screening systems around the world are more likely to be equipped with explosive detection technology that is not yet commonplace in cabin baggage inspection systems (frustratingly, the new measures have also served to highlight these shortcomings, which can now be exploited by those with terrorist intent); and, the screening process of checked luggage is much faster than that of cabin baggage, especially if greater focus is going to be placed on specific hand-carried electronic devices. Yet surely we need a response which ensures that no such device makes it onto the aircraft at all?

Let's consider the Daallo Airlines incident – and, indeed, the Metrojet bombing of 2015. Both tragedies were the result of insider threats. With Daallo, an airport employee literally handed over the device to the passenger thereby circumventing the passenger screening system. Were there to be direct flights from Somalia to the UK or the US, the latest restrictions would have had no effect whatsoever; the only people to be inconvenienced would have been those law-abiding passengers who checked their laptops into the hold. Now it may well be the case that it is partly because of concerns over 'insiders' that the US and UK do not operate flights to Somalia in the first place, but that does not answer the question as to why these latest restrictions only apply to certain routes.

Many of the departure points impacted by the latest restrictions are transportation hubs for onward connections to (and, more pertinently, from) places such as Somalia. Indeed, the intended target of the Daallo Airlines bomb was a Turkish Airlines flight. The likes of Emirates and Qatar Airways (impacted by the US regulations) certainly operate to locations where security concerns are considerable. Understandable, therefore, that overseas governments should want to address any loopholes resulting from suicidal passengers transferring onto flights at the seemingly safer Jordans, Turkeys and Moroccos of this world. But there are numerous other routes to the US and UK and, if the supposed device can be initiated by a suicide bomber, then they can also travel from Istanbul, Doha, or wherever, via other European, African or Middle Eastern cities not on the list.

There are a number of disturbing suppositions. Firstly that IEDs can always be detected in checked luggage – which they cannot – and secondly that our concern should be restricted to the electronic items listed. X-ray examination can yield positive

results. In an incident almost beneath the media's radar on 2nd March, an improvised explosive device (or grenade) was detected at Egypt's Borg al-Arab Airport (Alexandria) in the luggage of a Russian passenger bound, on Turkish Airlines, for Istanbul. Equally, sophisticated bombs can remain undetected; the printer toner cartridge bombs were not detected in the UK by a multitude of screening technologies, including explosive trace detection, and it was only a diligent Emirati security officer who, when screening the device sent via Dubai, opted not to rely on technology and to take the printer apart that resulted in the devices being identified. I obviously will not go into detail regarding the quantities and types of explosives governments are 'certifying' technologies to detect; suffice to say the presence of explosive detection technology does not necessarily equate with the guaranteed detection of real improvised explosive devices.

Above all of this, however, is the fact that the restrictions really are saying that bombs can only be detected by technology and not by humans. Global aviation security is really in a very sorry state of affairs if our checkpoint screeners cannot distinguish between a laptop-IED and a genuine laptop, or between an individual who is suicidal and one who is not. If the concerns are about electronic or electrical items, question passengers who are carrying them about their fidelity. If the concerns are only over laptops originating in certain countries, then don't implement restrictions on passengers who are not starting their journeys in those locations. Take, for example, a British business traveller heading to Istanbul on a city-break or an American family heading to Dubai, the former carrying a laptop, the latter a camera – why should they be

"let's not forget that al-Asiri also developed the undetected printer toner cartridge bombs…and the body cavity device"

inconvenienced? To ensure a level playing field? No, there's nothing 'level' about the new restrictions, or the airlines impacted. Regardless, in both examples it would be feasible to record the make and model number of the items as they leave the UK and US and, therefore, to permit those same items to be carried in cabin baggage on return flights. But we shouldn't even have to embark on such an arduous process…

There would be greater logic in restricting all cabin baggage on all routes (and I sincerely hope that does not happen), or even ceasing operations to all airports of concern; after all, the restrictions do not address the insider threat at these airports, nor the potential for homegrown terrorists manufacturing similar devices in the US or UK and boarding flights with them, as the liquid plot bombers would have done. The suicidal attack on Westminster, carried out on the first anniversary of the Zaventem bombings, clearly demonstrated that we cannot effectively monitor all those who may wish to attack us even if they live in Birmingham, let alone Mogadishu.

The restrictions actually enable terrorists to achieve their intended goal of disrupting our daily lives. This is not only bad news for travellers, who do need to be able to work on flights (a long-haul flight is, for me, the perfect office day; free to work, uninterrupted, on presentations, emails, spreadsheets and articles – including this one) and who rightly fear that their laptop, checked into the hold, might either not reach its destination or do so but no longer function (note how laptops

are packaged for carriage when opening one fresh from the computer store). Consider also that the business traveller preferring to fly with carry-on baggage only now has to wait for their luggage at the reclaim belt, even if they are only a day trip to Istanbul! It is also bad news for airlines as yet another trigger for unruly passenger behaviour is introduced into the system. The restrictions on liquids, aerosols and gels, introduced nearly 11 years ago, were seen to be a cause for people becoming aggressive inflight. The electronics restrictions are far worse – one might bemoan the confiscation of a bottle of water, deodorant aerosol, premium quality perfume or avocado foot lotion, but the value of a laptop, which cannot be confiscated, is far greater and passengers are going to be spending hours worrying about their valuables concealed, out of sight, in the aircraft hold. That's to say nothing of the concern of being separated from the priceless data, which may be commercially or security sensitive in nature, contained on laptop hard drives. Many, of course, now unable to work, and feeling frustrated, will simply drink instead!

There are also practical considerations, especially if the restrictions are not global in nature. Take a passenger who checks in for a flight online, expecting only to carry hand-luggage, and who goes through a centralised screening checkpoint at one of the 'targeted' departure airports. Screeners are not going to be trying to identify these restricted items as they will be permitted on most routes, yet at the gate, where the destination becomes

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clear and secondary checks are performed, perhaps only 30 minutes before departure, the passenger suddenly finds that they cannot carry their laptop on board. What then? Too late to return to check-in. Are we just going to have even more bags checked-in at the gate? Sure, the passenger should have known, but just look at the number of them who are still having their LAGs confiscated at checkpoints 11 years after they were restricted. Regardless, the potential for flight delays and disgruntled passengers is significant and many may opt not to fly at all. It would all be worth it if we were enhancing security as a result, but we are not!

The laptop et al restrictions could yet become another LAGs debacle, whereby obviously genuine passengers are having to discard (or now check-in) harmless products in the name of tick-box security and screeners looking for restricted items rather than passengers and employees with negative intent. With the latest amendment to Annex 17 (to the Chicago Convention) set to recommend (sadly, not yet standardise) the introduction of behavioural analysis into the screening process, this would have been the ideal opportunity for governments to mandate such processes to resolve concerns about passengers carrying specific items. Yet bizarrely we have opted to disconnect the passenger from their electronic items, making hand-search all the more difficult and the analysis of such items in the presence of their owner (comparing the item to the appearance and behaviour of the passenger) nigh on impossible. Illustrative of the abject failure to adopt a risk-based approach to screening, the US Department of Homeland Security seemingly can't even guarantee the integrity of its own employees, or their computers, and eliminate them from concern! On its own website it states that, "The limits on the size of electronics in carry-on bags apply to all passengers, including U.S. government employees with U.S. government-issued laptops."

My original intention, for this issue, was to write more expansively about the assassination of Kim Jong-nam at Kuala Lumpur International Airport on 13 February when, allegedly in a North Korean-sponsored plot, two women attacked him in the check-in hall, one with a cloth laced with VX nerve gas. It is a reminder that the chemical/biological weapons threat is one which requires our greater attention. The global terrorist has, after all, previously copied Pyongyang-designed attacks and devices; it is now 30 years since KAL 858 was brought down by an IED. The perpetrators used liquid explosives (almost 20 years before the 'new' threat of liquid explosives) as part of the main charge and the IED was infiltrated on board on the flight by two people who had travelled a circuitous route to avoid detection. Clearly governments today are not concerned about terrorists travelling circuitous routes with laptop IEDs!

We must, of course, react to intel. There is concern that IEDs designed by the infamous bombmaker Ibrahim al-Asiri, such as on Daallo Airlines, might be used to target aviation again. But let's not forget that al-Asiri also developed the undetected printer toner cartridge bombs…and the body cavity device secreted inside his brother's body in an assassination attempt on Saudi Arabia's Deputy Minister of Interior in 2009. Perhaps we should also respond to the threat of the body bomb now if al-Asiri's inventions are of concern? Then we could all become checked luggage! ■