

US and UK ban carry-on electronics on flights from Muslim-majority countries

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On Tuesday, the US and British governments announced new restrictions against carry-on electronic devices larger than smartphones on direct flights from airports in the Middle East and North Africa. The UK announced its ban just hours after the public announcement of the US ban.

The US ban, established by an executive order signed by President Donald Trump, specifically names 10 major airports in eight Muslim-majority countries, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. The UK ban targets all direct flights from Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Tunisia. The latter two countries are not currently affected by the US ban. The UK says it is “in close touch with the Americans to fully understand their position.”

Both the US and UK have indefinitely banned non-medical electronic devices larger than smartphones, such as laptops, e-book readers, and handheld game consoles in carry-on luggage and restrict those devices to luggage in the cargo hold. Trump’s executive order vaguely forbids any device “larger than a smartphone,” while the UK ban, announced by Prime Minister Theresa May, targets devices exceeding dimensions of 16 cm long, 9.3 cm wide, and 1.5 cm deep. Passengers and airlines flying out of the affected airports have until Friday in the US and Saturday in the UK to comply with the new regulations.

The ban established by Trump’s new executive order represents an effective expansion of the administration’s travel ban, which restricts travel from Muslim-majority countries Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen and halts all refugee admissions into the United States until July 14.

The new ban opens up yet another opportunity for agents of the state to search through travelers’

electronic devices, this time without their knowledge. US Customs and Border Protection agents regularly coerce travelers to comply with warrantless device searches. The agency searched nearly 25,000 cell phones in 2016, and is on track to search 50,000 this year.

Officials in both the US and UK have refused to cite any detailed and reasonable justification for these flagrantly discriminatory and anti-democratic restrictions. A statement issued by the US Department of Homeland Security claimed that “evaluated intelligence” showed that terrorists are “aggressively pursuing innovative methods” to smuggle explosives in consumer items.

A UK government source told CNN only that the UK “is privy to the same information and intelligence as US officials.” The bans were discussed and planned jointly by the US and UK weeks in advance of Tuesday’s announcements.

Electronic security experts have pointed out the absurdity in transferring suspected “bombs” from the main cabin to the cargo hold.

“If you assume the attacker is interested in turning a laptop into a bomb, it would work just as well in the cargo hold,” said Nicholas Weaver, a researcher at the International Computer Science Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, in a statement to the *Guardian*.

Paul Cruickshank, editor of *CTC Sentinel*, published by West Point think tank Combating Terrorism Center, pointed out on CNN that Abu Dhabi International Airport and Dubai International Airport are “among the most modern airports in the world” and subject travelers to the same security checks as US airports.

“From a technological perspective, nothing has changed between the last dozen years and today,” said

Bruce Schneier, cryptographer and computer security specialist told the *Guardian*. “That is, there are no new technological breakthroughs that make this threat any more serious today. And there is certainly nothing technological that would limit this newfound threat to a handful of Middle Eastern airlines,” Schneier concluded.

“The administration hasn’t provided a security rationale that makes sense for this measure targeting travelers from airports in Muslim-majority countries,” said Hina Shamsi, director of the American Civil Liberties Union’s National Security Project. “Given the [Trump] administration’s already poor track record, this policy sends a signal of discriminatory targeting and must be heavily scrutinized.”

The airports affected by the US ban are major hubs for Middle East-based airlines Emirates, Qatar Airways, Etihad Airways, and Turkish Airlines, which are among the world’s biggest carriers. The American airline industry spends tens of millions of dollars annually on lobbies that agitate for protectionist sanctions against their Middle East-based competitors as punishment for receiving “unfair” subsidies from their home governments. No American-based airlines fly directly to the US from these airports, so are unaffected by the ban.

Other countries may follow with similar bans. The Australian government says it has no plans to implement any restrictions, but Australian-based Qantas Airways’ security consultant and member of Australia’s Critical Infrastructure Advisory Council, Geoffrey D. Askew, told ABC News that it is “reasonably likely” that Australia will eventually implement a ban.

Canadian transport minister Marc Garneau stated that Canada is in close contact with US security officials and is looking at the bans “very carefully.” France’s Directorate General for Civil Aviation told *L’Express* that the French government is discussing whether or not to implement similar measures.

A German spokesperson for the country’s Federal Ministry of the Interior, Annegret Korff, said it was given advance notice of the US ban, but that Germany has no plans to implement similar restrictions. Etihad Airways is the largest shareholder of Air Berlin, Germany’s second largest airline after Lufthansa. Executives of affected airlines worry that Asian

countries will adopt similar bans.

Neither of the opposition parties of the Democrats in the US or Labour in the UK have voiced any significant disagreement with these policies. Democrat and ranking member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Representative Adam Schiff of California, gave the Trump administration’s new ban his full support, saying that it was “both necessary and proportional to the threat” posed by terrorism. In Parliament Wednesday, Labour MP Gavin Shuker grilled Transport Secretary Chris Grayling over the ban from the standpoint of expediency, not of democratic rights.



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