

Unsafe, Still....

Of course, there's no getting away from mobile communications. Like any technology, however, it must be regulated - especially in areas where the public is at risk. Globally, there is still a push to allow 'open season' for the use of cell phones on all aircraft: the financial rewards for carriers and technology companies are just too enticing. Unhappily, the enticements also extend to extremists who want to use cell phones as remote triggers for bombs.

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As you watch – almost mesmerized – the real-time display of **mobile global connections** inexorably increase, the full enormity of choices available to determined extremists batters your consciousness: all types of cell phones, PDAs, laptops and eReaders – in fact, any device that can connect to the Internet and thus receive any valid electronic voice or data signal.

So forget about any worries you might have about cell phone rage between passengers....

Because here's an easy prediction: given enough time, a resourceful extremist will find a way to use one of those portable electronic devices (PED) – probably a cell phone – to detonate an onboard bomb on some unfortunate passenger aircraft. As far as we – the public – know, it hasn't happened yet. (For important background information about this issue, see **Unsafe At Any Speed: Take #2**)

Now the growth of in-flight mobile services is inevitable on a global basis across all continents and countries – with one notable exception, however: the continental United States of America. For more on the global situation, see the entire range provided by OnAir which has signed many carriers for its in-flight connectivity programmes.

What that means is this: some international flights to and from the USA are now able to use the full capabilities of all types of PED. Over the Atlantic, you want to send an email to a buddy in Tokyo? No problem. Heading for Sydney, over the Pacific, you want to call your lover in London, U.K.? Too easy – go ahead. Oh, just be prepared to pay outrageous charges for the pleasure of sending those emails or making those calls – a small price to pay overall, some would say, to stay connected. Some might disagree....

However, just don't try to use your PED in the same way when flying across and within the USA: it can't be done yet, because the FAA and the FCC still prohibit full in-flight use. Should those august bodies change their positions – and there's no sign of that yet, thankfully – about full in-flight use of PED, then watch out: **the development and implementation of a wireless "Bojinka Plot" would then assume a higher probability.**

To refresh your memory, the code name "Bojinka" was used by Ramzi Yousef (now serving a life sentence) and his uncle, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (now awaiting trial in

U.S.A.), in the mid-1990s, to refer to a plan to blow up perhaps a dozen in-flight American passenger planes in a time-coordinated terrorist attack. That never happened thankfully, but 9/11 did. For more on Bojinka (meaning ‘The Explosion’), see these links [here](#) and [here](#).

If you need further proof, then read what Jessica Stern, of Harvard University, said in her definitive work, *Terror in the Name of God*:

“[Ramzi Yousef] had also plotted, together with his right-hand man, Abdul Hakim Murad, as well as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, his uncle, to destroy eleven American airplanes midair, a plot that was successfully tested on a Philippine airliner in December 1994, killing one passenger and injuring at least six others. The plot became known as the Bojinka Plot, which is Serbo-Croat for ‘the explosion’.” (p. 251).

For the record, Ms Stern is regarded as the “foremost U.S. expert on terrorism.”

But, apart from some lone, home-grown crazies and the recent failed attempt by a [young Nigerian](#), there has been no attempt by serious extremist organizations to carry out such an attack, and for obvious reasons: there is now a heightened awareness within governments, security organizations and air carriers; passenger screening is more *robust* (to use a much over-used descriptor); extremist organizations have been significantly disrupted globally; and even some passengers are now more alert to potential threats to their own safety – as proven during the Christmas day near-tragedy at Detroit.

The big gap in airport security, however, has to do with passenger luggage that is not carry-on: **not all luggage in passenger cargo holds is screened for bombs**. Read [here](#) for some background data from 2008. Quite simply, there’s still a ways to go before all air cargo can be regarded as safe.

So, if you were Ayman al-Zawahiri and you’re still trying to organize something more spectacular than the destruction of the twin towers, what do you do?

Other than a nuclear strike, what could be more devastating and news-worthy than planting bombs, as air cargo, on a dozen American aircraft and detonating them all remotely using cell phones? That sort of planning and organizing would be complex and involve a lot of people, but it could be done; and twelve planes with between four and five hundred victims on board would amount to a significantly larger death toll than that on 9/11.

And apart from the tragedy of so many deaths, there would be enormous economic repercussions, an aspect that is always a factor with al-Qaeda which wants to ruin Western economies, and particularly that of the United States. First, there has been already an investment of multi-billions to develop, install and maintain the technology to allow effective PED operation on aircraft; and second, such an attack, if successful, would bring all air travel to a temporary halt, thus impacting global business that depends on air cargo and also potentially paving the way for the demise of many carriers. In short, a significant part of all travel could be rendered bankrupt.

The very easy solution to this potential attack scenario is simple: ban all PED use on aircraft. Unfortunately, we’re well past that option, of course, because business interests will continue to push for growth of such a fantastically lucrative in-flight service. The longer all air travelers over U.S.A. are denied full in-flight use, the

greater the pressure to allow it. And when TSA finally announces, at some future date, that it can guarantee that all air cargo is screened for bombs, you can be sure that the FAA and the FCC will be pressured into changing the current prohibition on all air carriers over the United States.

When that happens, all your red warning lights should start blinking.

What's the probability the FCC and FAA will continue to resist any change, despite such a TSA guarantee? Who runs the U.S.A.? Who runs global business?

So, while waiting for that day to arrive, what will al-Qaeda do? Only they know, naturally. But, seeing as how the previous Bojinka plot involved a test vehicle, why not do it again, just to make sure it all works? Pick a single plane, a non-U.S.A. carrier, and make sure that the bomb explodes over the biggest ocean at a deep spot, thus making it impossible to determine the exact cause of the crash. After that proves successful, keep quiet about it and just keep preparing for the Big Day.

We should all hope that governments, carriers and security organizations have already visualized the above scenario, and are taking the necessary steps to prevent it, categorically.

One way or another, we're all going to find out.

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