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State Department spokesman wrong on “no boots on ground” assessment

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President Barack Obama recently announced that he would be sending an additional 250 special-operations troops to Syria to counter the Islamic extremist group variously known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh.

This development produced a testy exchange between journalists and State Department spokesman John Kirby at a briefing later that day. Matt Lee of the Associated Press peppered Kirby with questions about whether the expansion of U.S. forces conflicted with Obama’s past pledges to keep U.S. “boots” off the ground in Syria.

Lee: “The point is is that for months and months and months the mantra from the president and everyone else in the administration has been, ‘No boots on the ground.’ And now...”

Kirby: “No, that is not true.”

Lee: “What?”

Kirby: “It’s just not true, Matt.”

Eventually, Kirby explained why he believed Obama’s past rhetoric is consistent with the new influx of special operations forces.

“When we talk about boots on the ground in the context that you have heard people in the administration speak to, we are talking about conventional, large-scale ground troops that are designed to actually engage in, plan, coordinate, integrate, and engage in combat operations on the ground as units,” Kirby said. “We’re not doing that. We’ve never done that in Iraq or in Syria, and we’re not going to do it now.”

We wondered about the accuracy of Kirby’s repeated claim that “there was never this (message), ‘No boots on the ground’ ” from Obama.

Obama has certainly used the phrase “no boots on the ground” frequently. On Oct. 31, 2015, USA Today’s Gregory Korte produced a detailed accounting of his comments on the matter headlined, “16 times Obama said there would be no boots on the ground in Syria.”

We reviewed the 16 examples Korte tracked down and found that in half of them, Obama did provide a fairly thorough set of limitations along the lines of what Kirby cited.

For instance, in an address to the nation about Syria on Sept. 10, 2014, Obama said, “I want the American people to understand how this effort will be different from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It will not involve American combat troops fighting on foreign soil. This counterterrorism campaign will be waged through a steady, relentless effort to take out ISIL wherever they exist, using our air power and our support for partner forces on the ground.”

But the other eight examples outlined in USA Today are phrased in such a way that plays up the “no boots on the ground” idea to such an extent that we think a reasonable person would be tempted to downplay or ignore the caveats.

In an address to the nation on Sept. 10, 2013, Obama said, “I will not put American boots on the ground in Syria. I will not pursue an open-ended action like Iraq or Afghanistan. I will not pursue a prolonged air campaign like Libya or Kosovo.”

That address followed an interview with the PBS Newshour the night before in which Obama said, “We’re not talking about — not boots on the ground. We’re not talking about sustained airstrikes.”

When we reached out to the White House, they noted that the Syrian conflict at the time of these last two examples was focused on Syria’s chemical-weapons stockpile, rather than ISIS.

They also argued that Obama’s main point was that the mission to counter ISIS would be different than the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq which involved more than 100,000 combat troops at a time — a far larger fighting force than what is being used to target ISIS.

Still, we think that the existence of between eight and 16 examples of the “no boots on the ground” phrasing — sometimes with limitations emphasized, sometimes not — qualifies as an ongoing “message” from Obama, contrary what Kirby said.

“Obama has a credibility gap on this front,” said John Pike, director of globalsecurity.org. “They use the same size body bag for all U.S. troops.”

When we checked with international-affairs experts, several agreed that Kirby does have a point that there are legitimate differences between a large combat force and a modest number of special operations forces.

The risk, said Ted Bromund, senior research fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, comes when someone calls them on it — as Lee did — or when the number of forces becomes “so large, so controversial, or so obviously involved in combat that the claim comes into question.”

Benjamin Friedman, a defense specialist at the libertarian Cato Institute, said that the bigger problem is that the administration is “manipulating language to paper over a contradiction. So there’s a fundamental dishonesty there, despite the lawyerly definitional game they’re playing to avoid outright lying.”

But Michael O’Hanlon, of the Brookings Institution, said he cuts Obama some slack on the language.

O’Hanlon said the president’s “obligation is to protect us, not win a contest for perfect semantic consistency.”

Our ruling

Kirby said that Obama never said, “No boots on the ground” in Syria.

We accept that there are legitimate reasons for differentiating between a large ground force and a smaller number of special operations forces.

Still, it’s clear that Obama repeatedly used the term “no boots on the ground,” sometimes with extensive caveats about what constituted “boots on the ground” and sometimes not. And by repeatedly using that phrase, he reaped the benefits of calming the public about the extent of U.S. involvement. That counts as a message to us.

We rate the claim False.