

White House Reveals ‘Boots on Ground’ in Syria, but Media Too Giddy Over Special Ops Porn to Notice

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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CNN produced a [CGI version](#) of the US raid in Syria, turning official claims into visual reality.

The White House announced on Saturday that a team of Delta Force soldiers had gone into sovereign Syrian territory to kill an alleged ISIS “commander” and a few dozen other faceless bad guys.

Per usual, the media would retell the narrative based entirely on Pentagon and White House action movie prose. Just as with the bin Laden raid narrative—that later turned out to be [mostly false](#)—this tale involved some unbelievably compelling details: “rescuing a Yazidi slave,” “hand-to-hand combat,” “women and children as human shields,” “precise fire” (that, of course, avoided these women and children), and a body count, “40 extremists,” that would make Jack Bauer blush.

To the New York Times’ credit, it did [issue](#) one of the most passive-aggressive “we could not independently verify these claims” disclaimers in journalistic history:

A Defense Department official said Islamic State fighters who defended their building and Abu Sayyaf tried to use women and children as shields, but that the Delta Force commandos “used very precise fire” and “separated the women and children.” The official said the operation involved close “hand-to-hand fighting.” (The accounts of the raid came from military and government officials and could not be immediately verified through independent sources.)

No, of course they couldn’t!

Obviously, this is one of the limits of reporting on secret events in far-off, opaque war zones. Nonetheless, given that the last such politically loaded raid, on the bin Laden “compound” in Pakistan, turned out to be full of White House lies—to say nothing of Seymour Hersh’s recent, high-profile allegations that the [entire thing was staged](#)—you’d think a bit of skepticism would be in order. But, in a world of mass information asymmetry, the government’s word on these matters is treated as the authoritative one until proven otherwise.

This routine problem, however, is not the real journalistic crime here. The real issue is that the White House just admitted it has American ground troops engaged in combat missions in Syria—and no one seemed to notice, much less care.

While it's true the White House [has acknowledged](#) hostage rescue missions in Syria, this is the first time it's admitted soldiers have been deployed inside Syria for expressly military purposes. As one Defense Department official would explain to the [Washington Post](#):

The raid was only the second time US Special Operations forces are known to have operated on the ground in Syria, and the first "direct action" mission by US forces there. Special operators conducted an unsuccessful mission last summer to rescue American hostages being held by the militants, who later executed them.

Isn't this important? Isn't it significant that what began 292 days ago as a "[limited](#)," "[humanitarian](#)" mission in Iraq has now expanded (again) to include US ground troops—albeit in a measured capacity—in Syria? Many observers certainly thought so:

Nagata is black ops guy w long history of running covert SOF ops. This is just the beginning of increase of boots on the ground ops in Syria

— jeremy scahill (@jeremyscahill) [May 17, 2015](#)

1. We have boots on the ground in Syria. 2. We killed a senior ISIS leader there. <http://t.co/KGMuZWyoNH>

— Josh Greenman (@joshgreenman) [May 16, 2015](#)

I thought Obama promised no boots on the ground. <http://t.co/KjYmRK5SZL>

— Ali Gharib (@Ali_Gharib) [May 16, 2015](#)



If you don't have images of Delta Force carrying out a raid in Syria, a false-color photo of Green Berets pretending to assault a drug-cartel outpost is the next best thing, the Daily Beast finds. (photo: Thomas Cieslak/DoD)

But almost every media outlet was too fascinated recapping the DoD's superficial action narrative to ask why, or if, the US should have soldiers fighting in yet another country. Instead we got Pentagon-curated military-speak, that patented combination of sterilized violence, action prose and technology show-off, as with [CNN's](#) "Delta Force entered the

target area on Black Hawk helicopters and V-22 aircraft, a US official familiar with the operation said.” Or the Washington Post’s similarly breathless account ([5/16/15](#)), reading like the synopsis of a Hollywood thriller:

Delta Force troops, flying from Iraq aboard Black Hawk helicopters and V-22 Ospreys, encountered almost immediate fire from militant forces when they touched down....

In what a US Defense official described as “close-quarters combat” against militants using women and children as human shields, about a dozen militants were killed.

The key fact of the raid’s broader geopolitical significance is either glossed over or ignored altogether.

This war, just like the [US operation in Libya](#), has been marked by mission creep. The White House promises the objectives are X. Then they’re X, but also Y. Then X, Y and introducing Z, which is couched in special forces porn so it largely goes unnoticed.

What the media rarely do is stop to put things in context. It’s the slow drip of a war that’s sold to an American public in small, disconnected parts, so we don’t notice.

Put another way: If we were told in August 2014 that within a year, the US would have ground troops carrying out raids in Syria and Iraq, as well as bombing in both countries, would we have agreed? Impossible to know, but with the media framing these qualitative leaps in scope as routine (but at the same time sexed-up) military operations, the bait-and-switch routine goes almost entirely unnoted.

As I’ve pointed out previously, [only 40 percent](#) of Americans read past the headline, so when everyone from CNN to New York Times to [Vox](#) announces it as a military raid to catch a “key ISIS commander,” and puts the fact that it’s the first direct military action in Syria by US troops—if they do at all—in paragraph 12, most people will never notice the expansion in US military objectives.

Frame it however you like, but the US just announced it has active combat troops on the ground in Syria. Even if one thinks this is A-OK, shouldn’t media outlets make that the primary topic of at least one article?

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