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White House declines to call Taliban 'terrorists'

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“They do carry out tactics that are akin to terrorism, they do pursue terror attacks in an effort to advance their agenda,” said White House spokesperson Josh Earnest.

“What’s also true though is that it is important to draw a distinction between the Taliban and al Qaeda,” he said, pointing to a difference in designation.

“The Taliban is a very dangerous organisation,” he added.

The Treasury Department has imposed anti-terror sanctions on around 2,000 Taliban fighters, leaders, supporters and financiers.

But the White House’s distinction got short shrift from its political opponents, with Republicans sending footage of the comments to supporters.

“It slits throats, it attacks buses, it drives car bombs into markets and it’s not a terrorist group. Look, you can’t parody this administration,” said conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer.

Others said the White House’s distinction was based more on politics than reality, pointing to the negotiated release of Taliban captive and US soldier Bowe Bergdahl.

The White House says it does not negotiate with terror groups.

