EXCLUSIVE Interview with Abu Taubah Forces America to Look at the Heart of War on Terror

Shireen Qudosi talks with Abu Taubah, the Florida imam linked to Orlando Nightclub Shooter Omar Mateen. Following the Orlando Shooting, FOX’s Greta Van Susteren interviewed Taubah, who was accompanied by his attorney. Qudosi got the other exclusive: a two-hour phone call where Taubah explored issues of race, extremism, leadership, immigration, women’s rights, and where he seen’s Islam headed in the next couple generations.

Omar Mateen’s attack on an Orlando nightclub was unlike any other domestic terrorist attack in recent history. If September 11th made us aware of the hatred for America held by millions of Muslims worldwide, then when the jihadist American-born son of Afghan immigrants killed 50 and wounded as many on June 12th, 2016, it woke us up to the contradictions between embracing a multicultural ideal and what those cultures actually believe.

The Orlando attack further heightened deep national conflict on issues including immigration, religious tolerance, gun control, LGBT rights, and drew an even greater spotlight on the beliefs of the American Muslim community. Some organized Muslim communities came together to denounce hatred against homosexuality, vowing that their faith tolerated the gay community. They stripped Omar Mateen of his identity as a Muslim while glorifying the late Muhammad Ali’s ‘Muslimness’ just days prior. These well-funded Islamist voices of the organized Muslim American community took on the media and conservatives, again leaping to accusations of Islamophobia to create sympathy through aggressive attacks on critics.
Few of these Muslim grievance professionals stopped to understand how a Muslim like Mateen could exist in our midst. If we really believe, as we tell the media, that Islam is diverse in its practice and followers—in other words, that “Islam isn’t a monolith”—then we must recognize that both the homicidal and homophobic attitudes of an Omar Mateen are part of the spectrum in Islam, as it is practiced by followers today.

Even fewer in the Muslim community tried to grasp Omar Mateen’s journey into jihadism. The place to start is with the person suspected of radicalizing him, the 46-year-old Orlando-based imam who goes by the name Abu Taubah [tah-ooh-bah].

Two month after the Orlando attack, there is still very little known about the crucial imam linked to America’s second worst Islamic terrorist attack. In an exclusive two-hour phone interview, Abu Taubah opened up in an intimate conversation that exposes the deeply complex nature of America’s true fight against radical Islam.

In the worldwide Muslim community, Abu Taubah is seen as a progressive voice. He has earned awards from Islamic groups in Toronto, Sri Lanka, and Edinburgh. He is currently teacher of Islamic education, something he’s been doing since 1995. In addition to teaching, he hosts an online school called Timbuktu Seminary, which Fox News reported Omar Mateen as having attended.

In a subsequent interview, Taubah rejected the attack, but refused to condemn Mateen himself.

[on Fox News], when I was interviewed, they wanted me to
denounce the person Omar Mateen. I said no, we don’t denounce people; we denounce actions. And I denounce this action. I hate this action. But I don’t hate Omar Mateen, and I don’t denounce him.

There are two Taubahs. There is the Taubah you see in YouTube channels who is filled with extreme emotion ranging from frustrated passion to intolerant reductivism. And then there is the Taubah I spoke with, the Taubah who makes a calm and compelling case for his views.

Marcus Dwayne Robertson accepted Islam when he was twelve years old, though his mother insisted he continue to attend church. The son of educators, Robertson grew up in a home that encouraged the pursuit of learning—something he continues today on his path for a deeper understanding of Islam.

Eventually, Robertson would take name Abu Taubah from Surah Taubah in the Quran, the last of the Medina chapters forged during the warring years in Islam’s origin story. The verses emphasize a declaration of disassociation with polytheists and how to navigate the fulfilling and breaking of any earlier treaties. Also within that surah is the acceptance of any pagan who has repented their ways and comes to embrace Islam.

Taubah translates to repentance, but the word carries far more weight than that. Taubah is a moment of horror-filled realization. This concept is captured powerfully in the Hindu story about the goddess Kali, the mother of destruction. Because everything Kali set foot on was destroyed, the desperate attempt to stop her blood-lust led her to step on her consort, Lord Shiva, killing him. When she was faced with what she’d done, that realization pulled out of her state of
mad destructiveness. Kali subsequently biting her tongue is one of the most iconic moments of taubah.

Christianity’s expression of taubah is found in the story of Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus. Until recent times, Judas was tainted as the archetypical betrayer, with little to no understanding of his motivations. Arguably one of Jesus’ most devout disciples, Judas’ betrayal was fueled by his love for both Jesus and the movement he led. It wasn’t until he had committed his disloyalty did Judas’ horror-filled realization—a moment of taubah—fall on him.

To understand Abu Taubah the man, it is important to understand what motivates him. With Kali and Judas, their transgressions and moments of repentance came from acts of love and purpose. The same is true for Abu Taubah; he felt that his experience serving the United States in combat created a deep need for repentance that a deeper reach for Islam would fill.

The man who is raised is never as powerful as the man who has raised himself. Abu Taubah wasn’t indoctrinated by social media or a local imam. He isn’t another Muslim born into Islam, brought up in a remote part of the world with zero exposure to the West. He is soft-spoken and charming, albeit with undertones of aggression. He is neither a simple man nor an ordinary hate preacher. Taubah is from the West and he has shed its sentiments—at least, he shed everything he believes is corrupt about America and its influence.

As an American-born black man who was passionate about serving his country, Abu Taubah made a decisive move to join the
United States Marine Corps as his first act of independence upon reaching adulthood. He served with the 2nd Force Reconnaissance Company, an anti-terrorism force. His voice brims with pride as a patriot who served his country in a capacity that other Muslims would likely see as a conflict of interest. In recalling his military career, Taubah voice is laced with frustration with what he defines as political interference in intelligence work.

The era that I’m talking about is before Edward Snowden and 9/11. I joined in 80’s till the 90’s, so it was a totally different era; a totally different way of dealing with terrorism than we have now. Number one, it wasn’t on TV. Number two, since it wasn’t on the TV, it didn’t have so many people having their hand in it. There wasn’t the status quo, so we were allowed to do our job. Nowadays, it’s a political statement.

When his tour was over, Taubah didn’t come home to beer and barbeques, like other Marines. Instead, he dove deeper into Islam.

I wanted to learn my deen [Islamic law] better. I was holding out. I’d already been in the Marine Corps and traveled the world a number of times. And I had been sitting down and teaching children, and I realized that as a teacher I didn’t know enough. So I was teaching at an Islamic school, so I decided I need to go learn more. And I understood that the best place to learn was in Mauritania. And it’s an open desert and anyone being there would not to be there unless they were studying.

While the most severe interpretations of Islam are found in remote places of study, an escape from influence is found among spiritualists throughout history from Buddha to Jesus. But for Abu Taubah, the puritanism here is important. His
post-military retreat into a harsh desert climate is indicative of someone who wants to be free of Western influence. The harsh asceticism of the open desert similarly birthed Wahhabism, the result of a purging of non-Islamic philosophy, privileges, and temptations.

With considerable counter-terrorism work under his belt and a renewed Islamic training, Taubah took the first concrete step that positions him as a radical Imam. Becoming an intelligence asset, he used his unique skill sets to advance a post 9/11 counter-terrorism agenda, where he quickly became either exposed to or disillusioned by the end goal.

When I was in Egypt, the State Department contacted me and they wanted me to do a covert operation for them. I did. And it was a good way to make money. It was overseas, I needed the money. I’m a Marine and I know how to do work like this. I know Arabic. And we all wanted the same thing: to fight and capture what they call Osama bin Laden, and to stop terrorism. And I was already trained. So I did that type of thing for a period of time and then I decided I didn’t want to do it anymore. I decided I didn’t want to do it anymore because I thought the people weren’t actually fighting terrorism. We were fighting people who we didn’t like.

Conspiracy theories about America are rife in the Muslim world, including among American Muslims. Many believe in what is called the “myth” of Osama bin Laden—a puppet-figure, a phantom target created to justify American assertiveness in the Muslim world. While some Muslims across the spectrum of Islamic extremism see bin Laden as a saint, abandoning all worldly comforts for a higher cause, others will point to the conspiracy.

In Taubah’s world, conspiracies are blurred with racial grievances and critical social commentary. For a mind that cannot see the difference between theory, conspiracy and
critique, Taubah is dangerously influential.

His growing animosity toward America is underscored by terrorism charges that were brought against him while working as a CIA asset. Taubah challenges the FBI charge of conspiracy to commit a false tax form, a charge that included tax fraud for the purposes of terrorism in West Africa. Though the charges were dropped in 2015, Taubah spent four years in jail.

For three of those years they held me in isolation, where I was under total illumination. They had bright car lights on my face, 24/7, for three years. The lights never went out. The bright lights were on an angle facing my face.

Having interviewed intelligence assets off-the-record, it’s clear that Taubah’s story invites question. The CIA doesn’t wantonly throw hard-won assets in jail with grave terrorism charges—especially not highly-skilled individuals such as Abu Taubah. This is where the cracks in his story start appearing, and the conspiracies compound that show us the underbelly of religious and racial tension in the United States.

Why was a highly-trained former Marine turned intelligence asset arrested under terrorism charges and thrown in prison? Taubah’s own answer is clear: racism and Islamophobia. “A lot of it has to do with racism, and some of it has to do with religious racism,” he told me. “You know, religious bias and discrimination.”

Despite being an American, Taubah’s foremost identity is Muslim. He is not a foreign-born and bred imported imam who sees America as the “Great Satan” in the same way as terror
groups and foreign Islamists do. He evinces none of traditional opposition to America and the West that is typical of Islamist figures in other parts of the world. This makes him a striking figure in a larger fight against radical Islam that otherwise simplifies the landscape into a dichotomy of good and evil.

If we define “radical” as a viewpoint that sees all other views as inadequate and inferior then, by definition, being a Muslim who sees Islam as the only option is “radical.” In other words, Taubah’s not a radical because he harbors animosity against the actions of the United States; what makes him radical is that he sees no pious alternative to fully embracing Islam. And yet, by that definition of radical, most political and theological doctrines are radical, including the early 21st century American identity. For his part, Taubah sees use of the word “radical” as a fabricated concept used by the West to criminalize Muslims.

Though Taubah was raised in the United States, he has pushed beyond a state of integration with the larger American community. Despite his upbringing and military service in a free, multicultural America, he cannot see any other way than an Islamic one. Meanwhile reform-minded Muslims, on the other hand, show a tolerance for different lifestyles and a respect for the pluralistic spirit of America, even if we don’t always agree with the policies of its current administration. Neither approach is necessarily right; neither approach is necessarily wrong. The greater work is to explore the lesser-discussed undertones of what it means to be Muslim and American; what it means to be integrated. Anthropologists would favor a state of acculturation, of merging of multiple identities as favored over assimilating to a culture. Taubah rejects this, not only
for Americans but also for other Muslims who he says have tainted the faith with the culture they bring with it. For him, culture is second to religion.

Taubah is not shy about his views. On the subject of Sharia law, Taubah says,

> Sharia law is good, it’s the best law. People don’t even know what parts of sharia law are already in the Constitution. This all goes toward the confusion on sharia and Islam. We need more knowledge about these things. There’s nothing wrong with using the political system to make sure we [Muslims] get treated fairly. The Jews and homos already do it.

There is a question of whether adherence to Sharia law would also strip American states of their sovereignty. Under Sharia law, there are no state rights – there is only adherence to the one supreme law; all rights are secondary to what Sharia allows. What Taubah envisions, under Islamic law, is an empire that annihilates all competing ideas.

This is what makes Taubah a striking figure. Having been raised in the West only to later convert to Islam means that he’s lived life as a non-Muslim. He’s fought ‘the enemy.’ He’s done intelligence work for the U.S. government. Having seen more sides to this picture than the average American, he still reduces to a single point: Islam.

As we paint a picture of what it means to be radical, we’re beginning to see a complicated mosaic of grievances that, in one moment, align Taubah with the leading voices on the political Left, while at the same time spouting opinions that
would red-flag him as an Islamic extremist. What does become clear is that there is only one accepted interpretation and that is what makes Taubah—or any other Muslim for that matter—a radical?

Taubah sees both the United States and the Middle East as nations run by despots antagonistic toward Islam. And despite a military career of counter-terrorism work, Taubah holds an alarmingly diplomatic view toward radical organizations and their acts of violence. He describes suicide bombers as something the media plays up to promote their own agenda. When asked about his time at the side of the Blind Sheikh (a.k.a Omar Abdel-Rahman)—the notorious jailed leader of a militant Islamist movement responsible for multiple acts of violence, including the first World Trade Center attack in 1993—Taubah maintains that Rahman suffered at the hands of a media and government conspiracy eager to manipulate and defame Muslims.

This perceived conspiracy looms over terror groups including Boko Haram and ISIS, which according to Taubah, “are set up by the West to do clichéd things.” Taubah also can’t manage to denounce ISIS and, in fact, hints that ISIS is part of a promised prophecy.

I haven’t read up on ISIS. ISIS never said they’re a bad group. The ones that say this are the same ones who said Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. I don’t know if they’re good or bad. All is see is all these groups attacking them, and they’re just fighting to survive. The Kurds are closing in on ISIS. In five years, ISIS will be destroyed. In the Last Days [according to Islamic prophecy] it’s established that Syria will still be fighting and the Mahadi will come down in Syria and help whatever group is still left there.

Taubah then quickly steps away, and discredits ISIS’ growing recruitment in the West as a fad that plays into a government
conspiracy. His own world-view unravels at the seams with each contradiction.

Why does ISIS have a website running in the US? They could stop that. Why are we allowing it in the US—allowing them to broadcast their message? Why? Because it is something that justifies the justice program. Most of these people [pledging allegiance to ISIS] have mental problems. [The government is] getting those people and making it look good for them [and their agenda]. Why are we allowing their Twitter account? The US has agreements with companies to [fight] terrorism. There isn’t a freedom to let criminals do their thing.

The Orlando attack shone a spotlight on the challenge of the largely unassimilating, Islamic community leadership that has worked to insulate itself against criticism and examination by invoking Islamophobia. Over the last two years, there’s been active ground covered to get Muslim Americans politically engaged through new groups like M Power Change and USCMO. The next natural progression, especially in light of the deepening rift that feeds off social justice issues, is Islamic militancy. Taubah forecasts the same.

I think it should be an obligation for every man in the United States to join the military... Muslims in the United States are going to be eaten alive. We have not learned from history. We say ‘never again’ and that just means the Jewish people. But right now we’re going through the history of Herzegovina. We’re building up another Herzegovina right now.
Taubah predicts genocide, and his response to that is increased militancy on the part of America’s Muslims. This includes developing Muslim-run media, arguing that the government doesn’t allow Islamic media. When asked about Al Jazeera and its recent nationwide failure despite being allowed to run, Taubah pointed to larger struggle that’s reflects the hearts of millions of Muslim worldwide. “It’s America versus Islam,” he tells me. “An empire versus a small band.”

We’re not talking about media anymore. We’re talking about a larger Muslim mindset that has pivoted itself in opposition to the West. Whether you call America the “Great Satan” or “an Empire,” the sentiment is the same. For many Muslims, America is an overbearing empire that needs to be cut down.

Throughout my talk with Taubah, he invoked a host of secular grievances that would be familiar to any anti-capitalist activist. The same themes of injustices ripe in other areas: class warfare, lack of access to education, poverty, racial tension, police corruption, and distrust of the American political systems and its politicians. He also has a deep distrust of American society at large, saying that a form of modern day intellectual, economic and moral slavery is perpetuated through film and traditional education systems.

As potent as this left-wing critique of America might be, Taubah’s political views in favor of Sharia law beg the question of whether American right’s ringing the alarm on Sharia is not Islamophobic; it’s prophetic. And yet the passion and concern Taubah has for social issues rarely mirror the same sincerity among the political right.
From Taubah’s perspective, multiculturalism is something to be admonished. On whether Western culture is harmful to Muslims, Taubah confesses,

Prophet Muhammad wasn’t for the believer to see non-Islamic culture. If we see something from a non-believing culture, the heart would blacken because it was seeing things that hasn’t been seen or heard. Take movies for example. By the end of the movie, you’re rooting for the bad guy – people who are criminals or performing zina [fornication]. Those people are positioned in the movie was the best person.

Look at holidays. Children get overwhelmed by Christmas. These holidays have no basis in Islam. And if you don’t go along with it, then that society says you’re an extremist. Western society has become its own religion. Each religion has its own criteria: what’s haram [forbidden], what’s obligatory, what’s encouraged, discouraged, and what’s permissible.

In addition to solving hunger and poverty, Taubah argues that Islam can also salvage the institution of marriage through Islamic polygamy.

All the men in the world can’t be dirty bastards. It is how Allah has created them. Polygamy is better than cheating as long as a woman’s rights are taken care of and guaranteed, which Islam offers. For example, it is better to have a wife than a ‘baby momma.’ Right now there’s the ‘Friday night’ girlfriend and the ‘Sunday morning;’ wife. These things exist. Through Islam, a child from an out of wedlock relationship is given rights. It’s not a bastard.

Taubah has two wives and 15 children, all of whom live in the home with him.

He also addressed Hillary Clinton’s candidacy for President of
the United States. What would seem like a natural alliance alongside the hundreds of other Islamists who have run toward Clinton’s campaign, Taubah steps back to take a much more critical view at the candidate, adding that “Hillary Clinton is one of the worst. Her husband’s administration was the worst against black people in U.S. history. They destroy Negro communities.”

Yet, most jarring was Taubah’s unashamed misogynistic admission that, “Islam doesn’t allow for a woman president. Any woman as a leader is bound to fail.” He continued: “[Women are] more emotional, they have menses, or menopause; these things affect their mental state. Women in politics also have a chip on their shoulder.”

When they make common cause with Muslim activists, adherents of a cost-free multiculturalism on the political left aren’t considering the inevitable fall-out that comes after what they deride as “the American empire.” If it falls, what replaces it? The answer for Taubah is Islam.

We’re in the West because our countries are taken over by despots largely placed there by leaders in the West. Islam doesn’t say we have to leave. We have to gain respect of the populous by becoming leaders: mayor, governor, president. Muslims can have a lot to say over how we’re seen in the west. Islam is growing. Just look at birth rates and conversion rates.

The sentiment he echoes here isn’t that different from progressive Muslims and pro-immigration leaders who blame a refugee crisis on failed U.S foreign policy. Taubah confesses Muslim states are lost, but adds the West is
positioned to be consumed through Muslim birth rates alone.

We have a new phenomenon. The new phenomenon is that the majority of the Muslims in the world live in Western countries. That’s the problem [for non-Muslim countries]. Because half the Muslims in the United States are 15 and under. That means within the next ten years, we’re going to quadruple, because those 15-year-olds are going to get married and they’re still going to have children. And then we have so many that are still between the child-bearing age, between their 30’s and 20’s. Just by comparison of how many children we have compared to non-Muslims, we’re going to be a majority pretty soon.

The words “Islamic radical” conjure images of “Death to America”-chanting, uneducated Arabs, products of madrassas with no experience of the world around them outside of Islam. That image exists, but it’s far too simplistic.

Despite his open, monolith Islamic views that wouldn’t allow for a female president and supports the idea of polygamy, he is remarkably open about the clash of Western values versus Islamic values, particularly in contrast with the average Muslim American. While Muslim Americans stripped Omar Mateen’s faith and denounced him as a Muslim—a move that is easier than admitting there is a crisis in Islam—Taubah can see the difference between a man and his actions. That in itself is radically deviant from the Muslim majority opinion. In its own way, it is more humane.

Taubah is a powerful and charismastic figure because of the dualities he embodies, born in part out of the experiences
he’s had that are unlike most other Muslims in North America. Labeled a “radical Imam,” the question isn’t so much, “Is Abu Taubah radical?” but, rather, “What does radical mean?”

If we say that an extremist is someone with only one view, we can say that a radical is someone who preaches that view. At 46-years-old, American-born Abu Taubah has arrived at an extremist view despite a complex and rich personal history. And he is also, of course, a radical. However, as America becomes more polarized and fractured by competing value systems, we see more extremists and radicals among us making it difficult to spotlight one individual as an outlier when most of us are alien to each other.