

THE FBI GROOMED A 16-YEAR-OLD WITH “BRAIN DEVELOPMENT ISSUES” TO BECOME A TERRORIST

An undercover FBI agent befriended the teenager online. When he turned 18, he was arrested for supporting ISIS.

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Paul Ventura, father of 18-year-old Mateo Ventura, displays a photograph on his cellphone that shows what he describes as a photo of himself and his son Mateo, on June 8, 2023, in Worcester, Mass. Photo: Steven Senne/AP

LAST WEEK, the Department of Justice [announced](#) the arrest of a teenager in Massachusetts on allegations of providing financial

support to the Islamic State group.

A flurry of reports picked up on the arrest of Mateo Ventura, an 18-year-old resident of the sleepy town of Wakefield, [echoing government claims](#) that an international terrorist financier and ISIS supporter had just been busted in the United States. The Department of Justice's own press release on the case likewise trumpeted Ventura's arrest for "knowingly concealing the source of material support or resources that he intended to go to a foreign terrorist organization."

The only problem with the case and how it has been described, however, is that according to the government's own criminal complaint, Ventura had never actually funded any terrorist group. The only "terrorist" he is accused of ever being in contact with was an undercover FBI agent who befriended him

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online as a 16-year-old, solicited small cash donations in the form of gift cards, and directed him not to tell anyone else about their intimate online relationship, including his family.

The arrest has shaken his family, who denied allegations that their son was a terrorist and said that he had been manipulated by the FBI. Ventura's father, Paul Ventura, told The Intercept that Mateo suffered from childhood developmental issues and had been forced to leave his school due to bullying from other students.

"He was born prematurely, he had brain development issues. I had

bullying at school with other kids taking food off his plate, tripping him in the hallway, humiliating him, laughing at him.”

Contrary to the sensational narrative fed to the news media of terrorist financing in the U.S., the charging documents show that Ventura gave an undercover FBI agent gift cards for pitifully small amounts of cash, sometimes in \$25 increments. In his initial bid to travel to the Islamic State, the teenager balked — making up an excuse, by the FBI’s own account, to explain why he did not want to go. When another opportunity to travel abroad arose, Ventura balked again, staying home on the evening of his supposed flight instead of traveling to the airport. By the time the investigation was winding down, he appeared ready to turn in his purported ISIS contact — an FBI agent — to the FBI.

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There is still much that remains to be known about Ventura’s case, which remains in its early stages. More information may still come to light as it moves to discovery and trial, including about his dealings with the FBI and other activities online.

Yet based on the government’s own account of what led to Ventura’s arrest, there is reason to believe that his case is less a serious terrorism bust than one of the many instances in which a [troubled or mentally unfit young man was groomed](#) by undercover FBI agents to commit a crime that would not have otherwise happened.

This law enforcement tactic has been criticized by national security researchers who have scrutinized the FBI's role in manufacturing terrorism cases using vulnerable people who would have been unable to commit crimes without prolonged government assistance and encouragement. A 2014 [Human Rights Watch report](#) criticizing the use of informants in terrorism investigations said, "In this way, the FBI may have created terrorists out of law-abiding individuals."

This FBI tactic was a [mainstay of terrorism prosecutions for roughly two decades](#). While its use lately has waned, the Ventura case may indicate that authorities are still open to conjuring terrorists where none existed.

"There is still significant use of informants and undercover agents in FBI investigations who aren't just gathering information about potential crimes but are actively suggesting ideas for crimes or making it easier for people to do the things that they claim they want to do," said Naz Ahmad, acting director of the Creating Law Enforcement Accountability and Responsibility, or CLEAR, project at the City University of New York School of Law. "There are documented cases where the government has provided people everything that they needed to execute a plot. Informants and undercover agents have often been used as a tool in these investigations to prod things along."

"Instead of them telling me that he's doing what he's doing online and to take his computer away, they let him keep doing it."

Paul Ventura said that in 2021 armed FBI agents from visited his home, informed him that his son had been browsing websites "that he shouldn't be looking at," and connected him with what they said was a counselor. After the initial visit, he said he had no

knowledge of his son's ongoing communications with the FBI undercover agent online.

"Two years ago, the FBI came to my house and they took his computer and said he's on these sites he shouldn't be on. We said OK, and he wasn't arrested at that time or anything. I didn't hear from them again after that, but I guess over time things escalated," said Paul Ventura. "I wasn't home a lot because I work, and he wasn't at school because of the bullying. Instead of them telling me that he's doing what he's doing online and to take his computer away, they let him keep doing it."

THE FACTS OF the case against Mateo Ventura laid out in the government's criminal complaint detail how his relationship developed with the FBI.

In August 2021, when he was 16 years old, Ventura began communicating with an undercover FBI agent online. He told the agent of his desire to make "hijrah," or migrate to territories under control of the Islamic State.

By the time of the discussion, ISIS had been largely vanquished in its home territories of Iraq and Syria, though it is not clear whether Ventura had been aware of this. According to the Department of Justice's complaint, an undercover FBI agent impersonating an ISIS member communicated to the 16-year-old in broken English, encouraging his decision and expressly telling him not to inform anyone else about their online conversations, including friends or family. The criminal complaint in the case describes the exchange between Ventura and "OCE," or the "FBI employee acting in an undercover capacity":

VENTURA: I reached out to brother [A.D.] for hijrah [migration] I dont know if it is still possible but if it is I know it will take sometime.

OCE: Ahh

OCE: Inshallah [if Allah wills it] I help u, but before talk have rule my brother.

OCE: U must no talk about what said here or intention to anyone. No tell family.

No tell friend. No tell ikhwan [brothers] at masjid [mosque]. No one. This for both are safety.

OCE: Intention stay between U and Allah azzawajal [the mighty and majestic].

Ventura continued chatting with the undercover agent about what he could do for ISIS, including potentially fighting for them in a foreign country. The two settled on him buying a \$25 Google Play gift card and sending the redemption code to the FBI agent. At the FBI's direction, the 16-year-old also recorded an audio file of himself elaborately pledging allegiance to the leader of ISIS and transmitting the audio recording over the chat.

Over the next year two years, Ventura continued sending small amounts of cash through gift cards to the FBI agent, mostly through gaming stores like Steam, PlayStation Network, and Google Play. The amounts of his small transactions, which spanned over roughly two years, added up to a total of \$965 during the time that he was a juvenile, and another \$705 after he became a legal adult.

All the while, Ventura's conversations with the FBI undercover operative online continued, including promises to make a passport and assurances that he would teach himself Arabic "very fast" in case he traveled to Egypt on behalf of the group.

In the end, Ventura appeared to get cold feet. In September 2022, when he was 17 years old, he told the agent that he could no longer "go for hijrah," because he had been "hurt very bad in fall and can no longer walk." The injury was an excuse that the FBI – which, according to the affidavit in the case, interviewed Ventura six days thereafter – concluded had been made up by the teen.

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IN JANUARY 2023, just after his 18th birthday, Ventura got back in touch with the FBI agent on the encrypted messaging platform. Apologizing for not being communicative in previous months after his supposed injury, Ventura again said he wanted to travel to the Islamic State. The pair discussed the possibility of him dying in an attack by ISIS fighters somewhere in the world or attending a training camp.

At the FBI undercover operative's direction, Ventura took a video of himself and sent it over the chat, telling the agent that he had a beard now. The FBI agent praised the performance, saying Ventura was "strong" and "Look (sic) like lion."

Ventura sent the FBI operative another \$25 Google Play gift certificate, which he was assured would be used for jihad, before trying and failing to book several flights due to apparent lack of access to a credit card. On April 10 this year, Ventura finally succeeded in booking a Turkish Airlines flight to Egypt.

But instead of boarding the flight, or even leaving his residence on the night it was scheduled, Ventura contacted the FBI's National Threat Operations Center and reported a tip, stating in a rambling message that he wanted "10 million dollars in duffel bags" in exchange for information on future terrorist attacks. "I known (sic) you thought I am retarded fool but jokes on you I will not admit I sent this or communicate until the cash is delivered," the message said, according to the criminal complaint in the case.

By this time in the investigation, Ventura had not only seemingly developed cold feet about joining the group, but appeared eager to sell out his supposed ISIS contact to law enforcement.

Ventura called the FBI again several times in the coming days, telling them that he wanted to help with “terror” and again offering to help stop a future ISIS terrorist attack and to provide information about people who were facilitating travel for the group, in exchange for cash and legal immunity for himself.



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On April 20, according to the affidavit, he was informed in a phone call from the FBI that the information he had provided was “not specific and therefore not actionable.”

Meanwhile, as his attempts to blow the whistle on the FBI’s own informant in exchange for millions of dollars of cash appeared to stall, Ventura also continued communicating with their undercover operative online, apologizing for missing his flight to Egypt and inquiring about other ways he might travel to join ISIS. On May 16, he sent another Google Play gift card to the agent, with a value of \$45.

These interactions continued until Ventura was arrested in early June and charged with one count of “knowingly concealing the source of material support or resources to a foreign terrorist organization” – reference to the gift card donations he had spent years sending to the FBI during their chats online.

ALTHOUGH NEWS REPORTS echoed the Justice Department’s portrayal of the arrest as the foiling of a nascent Islamic State funding operation in the U.S., there is no indication in the allegations against him that Ventura had ever been in touch with the terrorist group.

Following his arrest, Ventura's father told reporters outside the courthouse that his son was being "railroaded" and is "100 percent a loyal American."

Ventura now faces up to 10 years in prison, if convicted of the charges of providing material support to a terrorist group.

Cases of ISIS operatives being arrested in the U.S. have become increasingly rare following the group's defeat several years ago in Iraq and Syria. Even at the peak of the ISIS's influence, many terrorism cases have been criticized for [utilizing entrapment](#) and grooming tactics against people that seemed to cross the line into both encouraging and facilitating them to break the law. Despite growing scrutiny from the public and civil rights groups, [those tactics have never been reformed](#).

"That kid has special needs, he got bullied out of school. He needed help."

More information may still come out in Ventura's case about his own actions leading up to his arrest. Based on the FBI's own account of what took place, however, depictions of Ventura as a dangerous

terrorist fundraiser currently spreading in the press are hard to deem credible.

The picture that emerges in the charging documents is, instead, the more familiar tale of an [impressionable, vulnerable young man](#), legally a child at the point the investigation began, groomed by FBI undercover agents online to break the law and generate flashy headlines in the aftermath.

"That kid has special needs, he got bullied out of school," Ventura's father told The Intercept. "He needed help."

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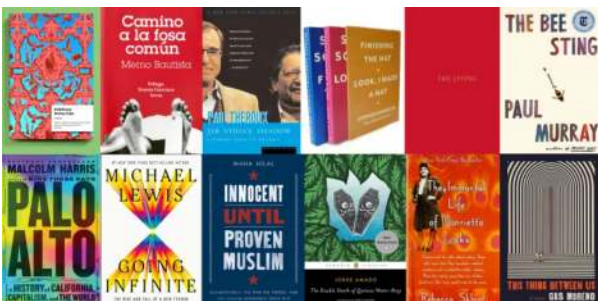


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