[INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC]

INTERVIEWER: Our top story on *Minnesota Now,* Federal prosecutors announced terrorism charges against a Twin Cities' 18-year-old, who they said had plans to commit a mass shooting at the Mall of America. We're going to talk to a legal expert about how this case came together. But first, Estelle Timar Wilcox reports on the charges.

ESTELLE TIMAR-WILCOX: According to the charges, Sheikhdoon Abdullahi Mohamud was still in high school when he started messaging an unidentified person, saying he supported the terrorist group ISIS. The FBI tracked those messages for almost two years. Eventually, Mohammed said he wanted to commit an attack in Minnesota at the Mall of America. Christopher Dotson is a Special Agent running the FBI's Minneapolis field office. He called those messages chilling.

CHRISTOPHER DOTSON: They document the idolization of ideologically motivated violence, a callous disregard for the sanctity of human life, a blind hatred of people of other faiths, and a cold commitment to carrying out his vision of violence in our community.

ESTELLE TIMAR-WILCOX: Mohamud allegedly arranged to buy a gun and ammunition earlier this week in Richfield. The person selling the gun was actually an undercover agent. Mohamud was arrested at the sale. In a statement, Mall of America leaders called the news unsettling and said the mall maintains several levels of security.

Some leaders in the Somali community said they're also unsettled by the news. Mohamud was born in the US. Prosecutors identified him as Somali-American. Local imam Yusuf Abdulle is the director of the Islamic Association of North America. He works with kids and tries to keep them out of violence. He said that takes work from community leaders and law enforcement.

YUSUF ABDULLE: The best solution is to be connected to the community and to make sure that we account for our youth.

ESTELLE TIMAR-WILCOX: The charges come as some Twin Cities-elected officials call for more intervention in youth violence in the Somali community after a shooting in Eden Prairie last week. Prosecutors say Mohamud was not involved in gang activity, but Abdulle says he worries that the news will fuel further hate toward the Somali community and further agitate young people.

YUSUF ABDULLE: When you eliminate the young ones, in a way, that is singling them out and saying, the Somalis are Muslim terrorists. They're this and that, insulting them, especially from some political leaders. You create more problems.

ESTELLE TIMAR-WILCOX: Mohamud appeared in court yesterday. He's due for another hearing later this month. Estelle Timar-Wilcox, NPR News, St. Paul.

INTERVIEWER: Our thanks to Estelle. Joining me for additional context on this story is someone with experience prosecuting cases investigated by the FBI. Mark Osler was an assistant US attorney in Michigan in the late 1990s. He's also been a former deputy Hennepin County Attorney. He's a law professor now with the University of St. Thomas. Thanks very much for your time, Professor.

MARK OSLER: It's good to talk to you again.

INTERVIEWER: Much of the evidence described in these charges comes from someone referred to in the documents as a confidential human source. Can you talk about, obviously, you have read about this case. You've read the charging documents here. But from what you have experienced in the past, from what you've learned, is that typically a term for an undercover person? What is a confidential human source in your experience?

MARK OSLER: Yeah, we have a confidential human source in this case, and we also have an employee of the FBI who is acting undercover. And those two things are going to be different. The human source is analogous to a street informant, someone who is going to be paid for leads and to establish communications and things like that normally. Usually, they know what's going on, and they're willingly participating in it, even though they're not going to make that role public. And in cases like this, where there's an international network that is trying to evade detection, that kind of intelligence can be especially important.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hm. And it's important to dive into this, too, because of the timeline here and how it takes to build cases like this. The unnamed source, confidential human source, exchange messages, the charges say, with Mohamud starting in December 2024 when he was in high school. By the summer, Mohamud allegedly shared plans to buy weapons and conduct an attack in Minnesota. They arrested him this week when he attempted to buy a gun and ammunition from an undercover agent. Can you talk about why a case would go this way, why the FBI would build a case for two years?

MARK OSLER: Well, there's two things going on here. And one is that there's always going to be a tension between intelligence gathering and law-enforcement activity, in other words, building up information, not just about this one individual, but others he may know, who he's communicating with, how he's reaching out to networks to become radicalized. And as long as you're gathering information, you're not going to step in and stop the activity. And there's that balance.

And the other thing that's going on here, too, is that they waited until they had a discrete activity, which was receiving the gun that they could charge, as opposed to it just being talk and messages back and forth. There's something else here, too, in this particular case, which is that the feds don't really deal well with juveniles.

We saw that, for example, when we had carjacking cases that were split up between the counties and the feds and that the feds took adults, the counties took the juveniles, in part because the feds don't have, for example, juvenile facilities, and there's a lot of procedures and hoops they have to jump through. So it wasn't until he became 18 that they moved and made the arrest.

INTERVIEWER: Are there steps that law enforcement can take to de-radicalize someone who's considering an act of violence rather than continuing interaction, building a case? And again, you're making a differentiation between law enforcement and other entities, but I mean, are there interventions that can be taking place?

MARK OSLER: There can be. And again, you're going to-- there's a cost to that, which is that if you have someone who's in the early stages of making contact with those who are radicalizing them, that if you intervene, you may tip off that network of what your sources are, how you're communicating, how you're monitoring people. And so they may wait until they have what they need before they actually step in. And certainly, they want to step in before violence occurs, which is what they tried to do here.

INTERVIEWER: And the charges do say that, in May 2025, so more than a year ago, the FBI visited Mohamud's home. His parents did not allow agents to talk with him. Does the FBI-- and again, I don't want to paint all law enforcement with one brush, but would any entity step in ever with a school or a community member if the family is being really quiet when there's evidence someone might convict an act of violence, especially with teenagers and young people?

MARK OSLER: Yes, I think that if they assess that danger is imminent-- and we see this in a variety of areas. There's young, white males who are being monitored as potential school shooters. And they'll monitor their communications, what websites they're going to, what they're writing to other people, and they're going to step in if it seems close to violence itself. And that is something that's a judgment call that sometimes can be very difficult to make, is when you're going to step in.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hm. What's your understanding of what next steps there could be in this case or a case like this.

MARK OSLER: Well, in this case, there are only seems to be the one target that we know of. And so it'll proceed like any other federal case, that there will be motions filed, potentially to suppress evidence and things like that. It could be that they will talk to this particular defendant and try to get information about other cases in exchange for a lesser sentence. That's very common. There'll be plea negotiations as well. Certainly, the youth is something that will be taken into account in those negotiations. And then, the fact that there was two years of communications building up to it as well.

INTERVIEWER: Mark Osler, thank you, as always, for providing your expertise and your time. We really appreciate it.

MARK OSLER: My pleasure.

INTERVIEWER: Mark Osler is a law professor with the University of St. Thomas.