

## JUSTICE

# Zakaria Amara's Second Chance

*A terror plot, a prison cell, and the hard work of redemption*

BY MICHELLE SHEPHARD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARTHUR DENNYSON HAMDANI

**T**HE EMAIL BEGAN: “I hope you’re doing well and I hope this email does not cause you any anxiety. I really mean that.”

The name attached to the November 8, 2023, message—Zakaria Amara—was one I had not thought about in years, but there was a time when I had spent hours studying him from afar. Amara was one of the leaders in the 2006 terrorism case where eighteen Muslim men and youth, four under the age of eighteen, were arrested for plotting to blow up downtown Toronto targets and a military base.

Back then, I was the *Toronto Star*’s national security correspondent, and we covered the story extensively—weeks, months, years of ink. It was considered Canada’s first large-scale “homegrown terrorism” plot, a term that took on new significance after the September 11, 2001, attacks to describe suspects who became violently radical without ever leaving their borders.

The plan went like this: two U-Haul trucks, each containing a one-tonne fertilizer bomb, would be parked in

front of the targeted buildings during the morning rush hour. A third bomb would simultaneously hit a military base.

Although the accused came to be known collectively as the “Toronto 18,” the group had broken into two factions after disagreements between some of the members. Amara, who was then a married twenty-year-old gas station attendant at Canadian Tire and a new father, called the shots for one of the groups. He appeared determined to act, and as police listened to him on wiretaps, he bragged that his attack was “gonna be kicking ass like never before.”

Amara went so far as to build a detonator and buy what he thought was a truckload of explosives from an undercover informant. “To put this in context,” Royal Canadian Mounted Police assistant commissioner Mike McDonnell said at the time of the arrests, “the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people took one tonne of ammonium nitrate.” McDonnell was wrong: it was actually a little over two tonnes. Amara had ordered three.

Like Amara, most of the accused were educated young Canadians who grew up in middle-class households. They were angered by the war in Iraq and Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan, believing their actions would somehow convince Parliament to pull Canadian troops from the conflict.

But they were also far from a monolithic group and were motivated by a variety of personal reasons, spurred on by online propaganda. They were looking—perhaps Amara most of all—to escape their everyday lives for something more meaningful.

Journalists showed up from all over Canada, the US, and beyond to attend the suspects’ bail hearings in Brampton, and anyone who had a long beard or hijab had a microphone shoved in their face. Christie Blatchford, a *Globe and Mail* columnist at the time, wrote that the accused “have first names like Mohamed, middle names like Mohamed and last names like Mohamed.”

Four years, many hearings, and hundreds of articles later, seven of the eighteen accused walked free, including three



of the youths, who had their charges stayed. Another four had gone to trial and were found guilty. The remaining seven, including Amara, decided to plead guilty. In 2022, after nearly seventeen years behind bars, including years of solitary confinement and a lengthy stint at Canada's most violent penitentiary, Amara was granted parole.

I was surprised to hear from him. The media's coverage of the Toronto 18 case had been criticized in some quarters—not unfairly—for being sensational, and I assumed he'd want nothing to do with reporters. I replied the day after receiving his email. I told him that, after two decades at the *Star*, I'd left the newspaper in 2018 to focus on documentary filmmaking, podcasts, and longer features but that I'd be happy to have a coffee. I was genuinely curious about how he was doing, how prison had shaped him.

We agreed to meet at a coffee shop on the campus of Toronto Metropolitan University. I was running a few minutes late, so I sent him a text. "Got us prime real estate," he wrote back. "Going to find a spot to pray. Brb." As I waited in line for coffee, I spotted what I assumed was his unattended bag at a table by the window. Just minutes later, he came back looking distraught and apologizing profusely for how that must have appeared—a convicted terrorist leaving an unattended bag! I laughed and confessed the thought hadn't even crossed my mind, which obviously made me a terrible national security correspondent. Throughout that first conversation, he seemed contrite, regretful, thoughtful, and pretty funny.

But I still had a journalist's skepticism. He was a convicted terrorist and had been described by police as persuasive and manipulative. I wanted to believe he was a changed man—but was he?

For months after—as texts, emails, and coffee talks became regular—Amara shared stories of his new life back on the outside, and I got to know him better. He got a bike and would ride around Toronto on his days off work, relishing his freedom. His written correspondence had a lot of smiling emojis and exclamation points. But it was clear

he has to work hard for that optimism as he also wraps himself in the guilt of lives ruined—not just his but those of his co-accused, friends, relatives, and especially his daughter. The more we talked, the harder it became not to want to write about him—to write the sequel. I knew he had a good story to tell, but I think it was something more than that.

Because what Amara really seeks is something he cannot control: redemption. And if he was indeed "rehabilitated," I wanted to help him get it.

**W**HEN AMARA pleaded guilty in 2010, he tearfully addressed the court: "I spent days upon days trying to summon words appropriate, meaningful, and deep enough to express my regret and seek forgiveness for my actions," he told Justice Bruce Durno. "I would like to promise you and my fellow Canadians that I will use my sentence to change myself from a man of destruction to a man of construction. I promise, no matter how long it takes."

But Amara's path toward repentance wasn't straightforward. His first three years in pre-trial custody were spent in solitary confinement in Milton's Maplehurst Correctional Facility and Toronto's Don Jail, where, he says, he became only more extreme in his views—determined to avenge the Muslim lives lost in the conflicts that followed the 9/11 attacks.

"There was a moment when I actually wanted to write, almost like a manifesto, condemning the process, condemning the government, condemning the war in Afghanistan, condemning the US, like just using that as a platform," he says. He had planned to read that statement in court. But when he tried to write, he struggled to explain himself—to justify what he had planned. "I just couldn't write a coherent piece." That was the first small crack.

Soon after, he was transferred into the general population at the Don Jail, where he had some challenging conversations. There was a Jewish inmate, and they debated Palestine. There was a former soldier who said he had fought in the war in Afghanistan and held some nuanced views. And there was a banker from Bay

Street whose brothers worked in the Toronto Stock Exchange, which had been one of the group's targets. The banker was "more of a potential victim than anybody else, and seeing him and interacting with him made me reconsider. If somebody shows me that I'm wrong, I am willing to accept it," Amara later told the court at his sentencing.

But when I ask Amara if he had really altered his views, he pauses and then says, "You know when there's issues of domestic violence and the husband or the boyfriend feels awful? And he says 'I'm sorry' but he hasn't really dealt with the core issues. You just feel sorry in that moment. Right?" In other words, to use therapy speak, Amara had not yet "done the work."

That would come, he says, after he was given a life sentence and transferred to Quebec's Special Handling Unit, or the SHU. The SHU, in Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines, is Canada's most restrictive detention centre and is often referred to as the "last resort" for inmates who pose a risk so high that they cannot be managed in a regular maximum-security institution.

Amara was devastated to be transferred to a place he described as a "den of lions," home to inmates who had committed violence not just on the outside but while incarcerated as well. "You have to remember that, except for the terrorism cases, everybody is there because they are, in prison lingo, 'established,'" Amara says. "You reach the end of the day and you're just so relieved. Ten thirty is when everything is locked up and shuts down. All you can think is, 'I made it,' but then you remember, 'I have to do it again tomorrow.'"

Amara was told he was there to be assessed. He ended up staying for six years. As the months dragged on—and without any type of therapy or rehabilitation—he relapsed. Amara said he became paranoid (in 2011, he even threw scalding water on another inmate), stopped talking to his parole officer, and smashed his TV. He witnessed an inmate get stabbed repeatedly and other crimes he says he has trouble talking about and would rather just forget.

In the summer of 2014, he began to obsess about the terror group ISIS fighting against the Syrian regime. “I was following the news and I’m even drawing maps, [charting] their progress, thinking, ‘Look, the brothers are gaining territory,’” he says. “And ‘Oh they’re going to get me out,’ you know? I was just delusional.”

But when he started to hear reports of infighting between the groups and the scale of ISIS brutality, he began to doubt his own beliefs. “When you’re serving a life sentence, you hold on to the cause, as it’s the only way to give meaning to the suffering,” he says. Ideologically, he still supported al-Qaeda’s opposition to the West and thought ISIS was just an extension of this group. But when ISIS began to break free from its al-Qaeda roots and declared its caliphate, Amara didn’t know what to believe anymore.

One night, he heard a BBC radio report about militants fighting each other—fifty dead.

Then came graphic accounts of hostages and suspected spies being beheaded, followed by mosque attacks, as the death toll steadily rose. He said he was especially struck by the murders of British aid worker Alan Henning and American journalist Jim Foley, both beheaded by ISIS. And he was horrified by the burning of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kaseasbeh, which he saw as a perversion of his religion, since there are explicit prophetic texts prohibiting the killing of anyone with fire.

Over the period of about a year, he slowly became overwhelmed by the horror of it all and doubted his “cause” and his faith. “They were upping the ante of how savage they could be.” Amara felt something break. So he started to write it all down.

**I**N THE YEARS after 9/11, the bulk of my reporting had focused more on abuses of power than impending terror threats. I investigated the detention and torture of Canadians Maher Arar, Abdullah Almaliki, Muayyed Nureddin, Ahmad Abou-Elmaati, and Omar Khadr. Eventually, the federal government would offer the five men an apology for Canada’s role in their wrongful imprisonment in Syria,

Egypt, and Guantanamo Bay and pay out more than \$50 million in settlements.

In late 2005, though, I began receiving tips of a different kind. A security source alerted me to a suspicious gun-smuggling arrest at the border, and I had reports from community contacts that various young people were under surveillance. There was a lot of chatter and fear, but I wasn’t yet sure what I was investigating. Some of the tips hinted at a very real threat to Toronto’s safety. Others warned it was another case of law

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enforcement overreach in the name of national security.

What I didn’t realize was that, once I started investigating what would turn out to be the Toronto 18 case, I was inadvertently setting off tripwires. Some of my calls were picked up as police were listening in. I even knocked on the door of one of Amara’s co-accused, whose name I learned from a source connected with the gun-smuggling operation.

Then came a warning a few months later—nothing official, nothing on paper, but a phone call from someone I knew in the federal government who said the RCMP was not happy with my probing. I was told: “You are making a lot of asses clench in Ottawa.”

The message was that if the *Star* wrote about the investigation before the arrests and something happened, the cops would happily hold a press conference and blame us. At the time, I didn’t have a story yet, and I think my editors were growing a little impatient with my digging. But now we knew something

was coming, and this case became my full-time assignment.

On the night of June 2, 2006, my backyard was filled with *Star* journalists for an annual summer barbecue we used to hold (my husband is also a journalist with the newspaper). More than sixty summer interns, reporters, photographers, and editors were crammed into our small yard, beers and burgers in hand.

I suspected arrests in the case would be coming any day, but I had no idea when. When my cellphone rang with an unknown number, I remember looking at the photo editor, who was tending the barbecue. *Surely it couldn’t be now?* It was around 8 p.m. on a Friday evening. “Pre-dawn raids” is a cliché for a reason—most arrests happen in the early hours, when suspects are home and asleep.

A source was on the phone. “It’s going down” was all they said. Within minutes, our backyard had emptied out. Reporters and photographers were dispatched east, west, and north of Toronto as I headed to the newsroom to pull the story together. By 9 p.m., we had a bare-bones version of the story online. At 9:16 p.m., the RCMP sent out a vague press release stating there would be a news conference the next morning.

By 5 a.m. on June 3, we had more than 5,500 words online. I was proud of our reporting, and while the coverage seemed sensational, the case *was* sensational. Over 400 police officers from across Ontario—including Toronto’s Emergency Task Force squad and canine unit—made the arrests in a series of dramatic takedowns Friday night and into the early hours of Saturday. We had no way of knowing yet if the allegations were true, and we could build profiles of the suspects based only on what we were told.

But the fear the case stoked, and some of the Islamophobic coverage that followed, was disturbing. A right-wing blog calling our coverage a triumph of “beat reporting over political correctness” made me feel queasy.

The case also prompted then prime minister Stephen Harper to enact a new law that revoked the Canadian citizenship



of those convicted of terrorism who were born outside of Canada. Amara, who was born in Jordan but grew up in Mississauga, Ontario, was the first citizen to be stripped of his passport under this new ruling. The law later became a contentious topic of debate during the 2015 election when Justin Trudeau famously argued against two-tiered citizenship, decrying, “A Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian.” Once prime minister, he repealed the law, and Amara’s citizenship was reinstated.

The *Star* followed the trials vigorously—my colleague Isabel Teotonio spent years documenting the hearings for a lengthy series. The cases were complicated: the allegations against each of the accused differed in terms of their involvement, and there was controversy about the influence of undercover operatives. Despite the severity of the allegations, some of the details of the cases seemed more farcical than fanatical. There was, for example, the so-called training camp that Amara and one of his co-accused organized in the snowy woods north of Toronto, involving about a dozen recruits (including an undercover operative) marching around the forest, watching videos, and making grandiose statements.

At a memorable preliminary hearing for one of the fifteen-year-old suspects,

lawyer Nadir Sachak inquired about his client’s survival training:

Q: It appeared that you guys were going to Tim Hortons or a doughnut shop on a regular basis?

A: Tim Hortons, yes.

Q: Tim Hortons, and this—to what, drink coffee?

A: Yes.

Q: And what, to use...

A: To use the...

Q: ...the washroom?

A: Facilities, yeah.

Q: What, number one and number two?

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: So, like, where would you guys go to do a number one at the camp?

A: Anywhere, really. I mean there were general areas where you would go, and it was known that people would, you know, use facilities accordingly over there.

Q: Okay, number two?

A: No, you had to go to the Timmy’s.

Q: So you had to basically...

A: Wait.

Q: Hold it until the evening every night?

A: Oh, yeah, two, three days even.

Depending. There were, I don’t want to say shifts, but...

Q: All right, so basically the trips to Tim Hortons were to take a dump and to eat some food?

A: Yeah.

I felt sorry for those who were acquitted or had their charges stayed. Being called a terrorist, especially in the fearful decade that followed the 9/11 attacks, is a label that is impossible to shake.

After the arrests, I spent much of the next decade reporting from abroad—an incredible beat that allowed me to follow the stories from the halls of power where foreign policies take flight to the conflict zones where they land. All too often, I’d discover that something enacted in the name of protecting national security would do just the opposite. An errant drone strike that hits a wedding party not only doesn’t kill terrorists—it inspires new ones.

In 2016, I was given a year-long fellowship to investigate “homegrown terrorism” and the counter-violent extremism—CVE—industry. My research pointed to two factors. First, this problem should not be left to law enforcement alone. No one wakes up a terrorist. There are many factors and stages that can last years before police are involved.

**FAR LEFT**

A tactical officer involved in the June 3, 2006, arrests

**LEFT** Defence lawyers address media outside a Brampton court on June 6, 2006.

And second, no deradicalization program can work without an intense one-on-one approach involving mentors who have credibility with vulnerable youths.

It made me think back to whether what happened in the Toronto 18 case was the best outcome—the millions spent investigating, the elaborate undercover operations, lives ruined, not just of the accused but also their families and friends, and the spread of Islamophobia that the arrests generated.

Had there been programs or other options available back in 2006, could those accused have been deradicalized? Could Amara have been diverted instead of arrested?

**L**ANGUAGE HAS BEEN at the centre of Amara's case from the start. As a teenager, he had a blog where he'd opine about his growing anti-Western views, at one point complaining about not being able to persuade some friends. "Trying to convince these people is like trying to subdue the Mercury Guy from *Terminator 2*, impossible. Unless we can get some liquid Nitrogen that is (CSIS, I was just joking)." CSIS took note.

And then, after his arrest, it was my language, along with that of others in the media, that established his public profile as a terrorist. I looked back at the

stories we wrote when Amara was first arrested—beginning that June 3 morning under the headline "Terror Cops Swoop." As opposed to many of the columns, the stories were straightforward: this is what is being alleged, this is what people are saying, "none of the allegations have been proven in court."

But, of course, even these news stories contained some of the "war on terror" platitudes that politicians and analysts loved and would convict suspects in the court of public opinion. A day after the arrests, with details about the accused still unfolding, Harper told reporters, "As at other times in our history, we are a target because of who we are and how we live, our society, our diversity, and our values—values such as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law—the values that make Canada great, values that Canadians cherish."

Once Amara had his revelation about ISIS, he began to rewrite his narrative. And once he started, he couldn't stop.

In 2015, Amara was transferred from the SHU to Millhaven Institution, a less restrictive maximum-security facility in Bath, Ontario. It was here, a couple years later, that he met Sena Hussain during a prison "health fair," where different organizations set up booths for inmates to browse. Hussain produces and edits a magazine called *Cell Count*, which goes to all federal, and some provincial, prisons across Canada and publishes the writing, poetry, and artwork created by inmates for inmates.

Hussain encouraged Amara to submit his writings. She was so impressed by one story entitled "The Boy and His Sandcastle" that she ran it on the magazine's cover. Amara writes about his upbringing (including a sexual assault in his youth), his path to radicalization, the impact of his imprisonment, and, eventually, his enlightenment. "It is said that those who are the most dogmatic are usually the least certain," Amara writes. "A vivid depiction of this internal struggle is that of a boy who is perpetually fortifying the walls of a sandcastle he built too close to the waves."

"Prior to ISIS, whenever innocent people were killed, I would simply tell

myself that it was 'collateral damage' if those killed were non-Muslims, or a 'mistake' if they were Muslims," he wrote. "Every atrocity committed by ISIS was like a Tsunami that would violently demolish my Sand Castle and leave no trace of it behind. Yet I kept frantically rushing back to rebuild it."

When he could no longer justify what he once thought was righteous, he worried that he would also have to abandon his faith. In his mind, his radical ideology was connected to his religion. When he finally accepted that they were not, he says, he experienced a "spiritual ascent."

Gordon Darrall, a retired elementary school teacher who met Amara when he volunteered at a prison book club at Millhaven, says he was "stunned" by the piece. "He did not fit my image of a terrorist leader," Darrall recalls. "He wasn't very black and white at all in his views." Reading and writing, and supporters like Hussain, is what Darrall credits for Amara's transformation. "He had to basically find his own way to changing his attitudes in prison. The correction services did not do very much to support that at all," he says. When I ask Amara about it, he calls it self-administered therapy. "When you abandon an ideology, an extremist ideology, it leaves, like, a void." Reading and writing filled that, to some extent.

Writing-as-therapy was a sentiment I could understand. I always find I can express myself more clearly in writing, as opposed to talking. Years ago, I sat down to write about my experiences with infertility just to try to process them—to try to alleviate the sadness. I ended up publishing the column in the *Star*, thinking it may help others who feel alone in their struggles—but that had not been my intention in going public. I just needed to quiet the noise in my head.

Amara's sister, Dena, says she noticed the change in her brother once he began to write regularly. In Millhaven, she was allowed her first private visit with him, without a Plexiglas barrier. Dena says they began having the "most straightforward" conversations they had had since his arrest nearly a decade earlier.

# Leaving

BY PIERRE NEPVEU

Each night, a truck stops before my door,  
 motor running, headlights on,  
 the driver, barely seen, stares straight ahead,  
 the hum has awakened me, I'm at the window  
 asking myself if the driver will move at last,  
 if he's bringing me a package or coming to get me,  
 the night is alive with the presence of this truck,  
 unmarked, with no distinctive colour,  
 the driver is waiting for me to come out,  
 for me to open the door and sit  
 in the passenger seat,  
 but to go where? Why do I suddenly feel  
 that this strange and anonymous trip would alter everything,  
 that the dawn arriving would be rosier  
 than all the heartrending roses of my life,  
 and that the following day would be my day of truth,  
 the fulfillment of my fatigue, perhaps the epilogue  
 for my sorrows great and small?

*Translated from the French by Donald Winkler*

“He had really reached that point of confronting his truth and not lying to himself,” she says.

With his permission, she created a Facebook account under his name to post his stories and poems for a wider audience. Amara still seemed to crave a purpose that was bigger than himself. The profile featured a photo of him holding pen to paper, alongside pictures of him with signs professing his love for his mother and daughter. Among the stories she posted was “The Boy and His Sandcastle.”

But six months later, in the summer of 2018, a reporter at Global TV discovered the profile, and an hour after calling Facebook for comment, the account was shut down. “We don’t allow mass murderers to maintain a presence on Facebook,” the company told Global.

Phil Gurski, a former Canadian Security Intelligence Service analyst during the Toronto 18 investigation, wrote a blog post about the whole episode. For Gurski, Amara showed “a distinct lack of ownership” by blaming his actions on “a perfect storm of internal and external influences.” Gurski contended he had alternatives to violent extremism. “You had a choice,” he wrote. “None of this is anyone’s fault but yours. Accept that.”

Amara was stung by the claim that he was ducking responsibility. “That’s exactly what I was trying to do in my writing,” he says. “It was really devastating.”

**A**MARA WAS THE LAST of the Toronto 18 suspects to get parole two years ago. Aside from one of his co-accused, who left Canada for Syria in 2013 and died fighting, the rest have

reportedly gone on to live quiet lives. One of the men now practises law.

Days before Amara turned thirty-nine last August, he had his parole extended for another six months (at the end of which it will be reviewed again). He must continue to live at a halfway house and abide by other conditions, which include seeking permission for his outings. He’s still restricted from unsupervised access to the internet or possessing electronic devices such as a smartphone. He bangs out texts old school, tapping the numbers for letters on his Easyfone (advertised online as “mobiles for senior citizens”), and he recently purchased a word processor so he can keep writing. Amara self-published a collection of his writings, which he dedicated to his sister, under the title *A Boy and His Sandcastle*. Last fall, he began a creative writing continuing education course at the University of Toronto.

Amara also works five days a week at a watch repair shop and as an occasional consultant for Estimated Time of Arrival. ETA is a counter-violent extremism program that began in 2020 and is housed in Yorktown Family Services, a mental health centre. It’s the kind of program my fellowship research showed was direly needed. It’s the kind of program Amara says he wishes he could have accessed when he was twenty.

David O’Brien is ETA’s director and comes from a background of three decades working in the mental health field. He says, in around 2016, he started to notice more youths coming into their programs being “openly hateful.” A few years later, the Toronto police approached his centre with a case of a youth who wanted to shoot up his school on behalf of Hitler—could they intervene? Soon, other cases were referred by police (some likely from CSIS but channelled through law enforcement).

“We knew nothing at the time about the CVE sector,” O’Brien says. But the cases went well. “It’s not sexy,” O’Brien says of the program. “We just wrap services around people and identify all the vulnerabilities that led them to these hate communities, to this terrorism or extremism.” That means helping them

with health issues or mental health therapy, or helping them find employment, education, or housing. Essentially, what O'Brien and his team provide is a community.

What they rarely do is talk ideology. "When I talk to parents and others, the first thing is they want to pound the ideology out of their kids and their loved ones, right?" O'Brien told me. "But that's the worst thing you can do; it actually reinforces the radicalization." Sometimes the ideology is all their clients have to cling to. Just as Amara explains in his writing, that's the hardest part to let go—that supposed sense of purpose and a higher calling.

O'Brien is not able to discuss any one case, Amara's included, but he believes, thanks to ETA's success in the past five years, that it is less likely today to see expansive, labour-intensive criminal cases such as the Toronto 18, which involved nearly two years of intelligence and undercover operations. "Police had no other tool than arrests," he says about the years after 9/11. Now law enforcement and security officials regularly refer people to ETA before their actions can become criminal. Cases these days include a worrying number of young people with white supremacist and neo-Nazi views. In the past four years, the centre has had nearly 300 participants in their program.

O'Brien is especially pleased with the recent uptick in clients who have come to them not from police but thanks to the advice of relatives, teachers, or friends. "We're trying to get everyone on board to keep their eyes and ears open," O'Brien says. "Nobody just blows up. Nobody just shoots up a school; there are signs. Many weeks and years of signs leading up to this. I think, if we have more awareness, we can start intervening."

There are no programs similar to ETA inside prisons—which is one of the reasons Amara was denied parole the first time he went before the board in 2021. "They wanted me to show I had enrolled in a program that didn't exist."

The board members noted this longstanding problem in their written decision. "In the absence of validated risk

tools that can objectively and accurately assess your risk of violent recidivism in the area of terrorist activity, and in the absence of any counselling or programming that is designed to help you develop strategies to mitigate your risk, the Board is challenged to make an assessment of your risk and readiness for release." The members did credit Amara for his own efforts and "self-management" but denied his application.

Trying to prepare him for his next attempt at parole, Hussain, editor of *Cell Count*, reached out to ETA on his behalf. Amara says O'Brien visited him at Warkworth Institution, the medium-security prison in Campbellford, Ontario, where he had been transferred after Millhaven, and later conducted one-on-one telephone sessions.

Amara also opened himself up to the RCMP—offering to be interrogated for as long as it would take the federal agents to decide if he indeed was a changed man and no longer posed a risk.

His efforts paid off. The board acknowledged his work with ETA and meeting the RCMP's National Security Enforcement Team. "Following that process, the RCMP informed your PO [parole officer] that they considered you to no longer be radicalized and that the change in your values, attitudes and belief appears to be long term. Further, that they believe you could be a positive influence on others who hold radical ideologies," the board members wrote in granting Amara parole in 2022.

"I beg you, from the bottom of my heart, I don't want you to go to your bed tonight anxious about me," Amara told the board members. "I don't want you to worry about me, because you're not going to be hearing anything bad about me in the future."

"We certainly hope not," the panel chairman said. "For no personal reason, I hope we don't see you again."

**A**MARA WAS CONCERNED about taking our private conversations public when I first asked to write this story—scared to be back in the news. "I think, on one hand, he just wants to

live a normal life, if you can call it that," Dena told me. "He wants to move on from what happened."

It took Amara weeks to decide, and I didn't push him. I also worried about his name in the headlines and the stress it may cause.

But Amara changed his mind, in part, in the hope of being forgiven beyond his inner circle. "I've been uber-scrutinized by Corrections, the Parole Board, and the RCMP, but not yet by the public," he wrote me. "I don't believe that redemption is possible without public scrutiny." He said he hoped his experience would help others learn from his mistakes and wanted his family—particularly his daughter—to read something in the media and be proud rather than feel ashamed.

It feels significant, nearly two decades after his arrest, to be writing a story about Amara the repentant terrorist, since I had been the first to introduce Canadians to Amara the terrorism suspect.

I didn't have any regrets about the reporting we did around Amara's arrest, even as I lamented some of the fallout. The fact remains he was convicted in a court of law—a conviction that he appealed and lost. Of course, there's no way to know if he could have been stopped earlier, through counselling. But he admits his guilt and often himself says he is grateful he was caught.

And yet Amara has certainly paid a price by living almost half his life behind bars. As he notes, his family and friends, the parole board, and even the RCMP believe he deserves a second chance. I didn't want his story to end the day he was sentenced as a terrorist.

I asked Amara if, maybe, that's why he reached out to me in the first place—if he was craving this full-circle moment. "I do think I wanted to show you I'd changed," he said. "What you do with that is up to you. I know you have a job to do." 📝

**MICHELLE SHEPHARD** is an award-winning journalist. She has covered issues of terrorism and civil rights since the 9/11 attacks.