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Regional

Heil studies terrorism, sex trafficking in U.S.

Mention the word terrorism and a number of images come to mind. For many people, these images are tied to 9/11 and other recent events. However, terrorism is a much more complex and much older phenomenon than most people realize. Someone who studies terrorism and other social phenomena is Erin Heil, an assistant professor in the department of sociology and criminal justice at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Heil was born in White Bear Lake, Minn. She obtained her bachelor's degree in psychology at SIUE, her master's degree in sociology, also from SIUE and her doctorate in criminal justice from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She points to the large-scale social movements, including "Arab Spring" in the Arab world and the "Occupy Movement" that has taken place in the U.S. and Europe, as important examples of popular movements reacting against the status quo, and as important cases for social scientists to study. While these specific movements have different objectives, Heil said that many governments have reacted in very similar ways.

"We expect to see a very strong repressive response by the state, especially when you see any sort of oppressed group standing up to the state," Heil said. "And it is probably going to end as other revolutions have with a lot of bloodshed and a lot of arrests and very minimal change, unfortunately."

We also tend to define terrorism in different ways depending upon the historical and political context, Heil explained. Although the group of Americans who embarked in the Revolutionary War against England in the 18th century is seen today as patriots, the British considered them as terrorists.

"Terrorism is a final tactic for an oppressed group," said Heil. "So when you have an oppressive government they are going to stand up with whatever means that they have. They don't have a military, they don't have the weaponry, and so they have to rely on terrorist tactics and a lot of times the state replies with terrorist tactics as well. So it really depends which side of the battle you are on and who is defining who as a terrorist."



Photo by Ari Takara

Dr. Erin Heil in her office on the SIUE campus.

When asked if we are going to see more movements such as the "Arab Spring" or the "Occupy Movement" in the near future, Heil is categorical.

"Definitely," she said. "Even what we are seeing in the U.S. with people now starting to stand up against the economy, and as the media grab attention of successful movements across the world, you are going to see other groups that decide to try to take it into their own hands and stand up to the regimes. A lot of times when we see student

movements or university-based movements you are going to have a more middle class movement that is not as oppressed as some of these other individuals."

For Heil the media are largely responsible for the incomplete and skewed view we have of terrorism as a phenomenon. "Most people in America have only one source of news and that is where they get all of their information, whether it is liberal biased or conservative biased they have that one source and they are going

to get that one bit of information," she said. "And most people don't try to look around and look at different sources to figure out what different groups are saying."

There is also a big misunderstanding about the role religion plays in these movements, said Heil, who added that her own students initially have narrow views of terrorism and terrorists. "When you talk to a lot of my students, most of them say Muslims," she said. "Not all Muslims, but

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they definitely have that linkage of stereotyping Muslims as terrorists and that this is a group that we do need to focus on."

Another social phenomenon that Heil has studied is sex trafficking. Although it is rarely mentioned in the media, it is a serious problem in the United States. Heil studied the problem in both Florida and St. Louis.

"In Florida most of the victims' countries of origin are Mexico or Guatemala and they have been trafficked here and are in extreme forms of slavery living in brothels," Heil said. "Some individuals have actually been sold to citizens of the United States to be sex slaves, and we see a lot of the migrant farmers being forced into a situation of slavery in the agricultural industry." St. Louis, she added, is now considered a hub of sex trafficking because of the ways our highways cross the area. It is considered a good takeoff point for traffickers to move people around the country. Heil said that she feels that the American public needs to be more aware of sex trafficking as a serious problem.

"In my class alone I do a couple of lectures on sex trafficking and labor trafficking and it is interesting to see the response from students because they will start to look in their own communities," Heil said. "Maybe it is a group of apple pickers that come every fall. The students are now starting to identify things. So if you can just let the general public know some of those indicators of trafficking just so they can keep an eye out and maybe alert authorities that there is a possibility that there could be a trafficking situation this would be very helpful to the problem."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.