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INTERVIEW

Q: Good afternoon. It is Tuesday, November 25. I'm here with Sarah Mendelson to conduct an oral interview with her regarding her time at the United States Agency for International Development in the Bureau of Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA). But as we do generally with these interviews, we want to get a little bit of the backstory. So Sarah, I'm going to start with how you would describe your origin story, in terms of getting involved in democracy, human rights, and governance work? Before you were an academic, before you went to university, and then a little bit about your time at university studying various subjects.

MENDELSON: Originally, I was a Sovietologist. After I graduated college, I went to Russian language summer school, and I became very close to my Russian language teachers who had been very involved with the Soviet dissident movement. They were friends and relatives of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The matriarch of the group, actually ran the "Soviet desk" for—I could barely believe it at the time—a Central Intelligence Agency funded effort to get literature into East/Central Europe and Eurasia. Veronika Stein appears in the recently published book *The CIA Book Club* that details this work, but at the time, it sounded like a movie to me. Anyway, I ended up living for a little while in Jersey City with these folks. And through them, I met the biographer of Solzhenitsyn, Michael Scammell, and I talked him into hiring me as his research assistant. He was running, at the time, a publication in London called *Index on Censorship*. It was centered on freedom of speech as a human right. So that was the beginning.

Q: What year was this? Sarah, just to give a little context

MENDELSON: Fall, 1984 I was with the émigrés in Jersey City. And then spring 1985, I was in London working for Scammell.

Q: What university were you (attending)?

MENDELSON: I had finished Yale in spring 1984. I started at Colombia in the fall of 1985, and the dissertation was on the Soviet intervention and withdrawal from Afghanistan. So a kind of pause from that world. And then, of course, the Soviet Union

collapsed, and I found myself working for the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Moscow in 1994-1995.

Q: I mean (were you for) ten years working on the dissertation, or were there things in-between that got you also involved in democracy, human rights work during that period?

MENDELSON: Well, from 1985 to 1993 I was doing course work, the dissertation research in Moscow in 1990, and then a series of pre-docs focused on the dissertation (at Cornell and Stanford). And then I had a postdoc at Princeton from 1993 to 1994 and then moved to Moscow.

Q: Before you get to the National Democratic Institute, can I just take a little bit back, even before 1980 and just a little bit of your backstory in terms of growing up, did these issues mean anything to you as a kid in your household, were these issues relevant at all, democracy, human rights related issues? Did they come up in household conversations?

MENDELSON: Well, I went to Quaker school from kindergarten through grade twelve. In Grade Two, we made a peace post where we each got a square, and we were—I mean it was 1970, so we're thinking about the Vietnam War. And I do think about the later work that I did on combating human trafficking; I came by it really, probably through this abolitionist schooling, and then the best teacher in the school, Clinton Ely, taught Russian literature. (He had been Strobe Talbot's teacher at another school, also getting him interested in things Russian.) Anyway, Mr. Ely was an incredibly brave, former Marine who had landed on Okinawa at age seventeen during World War Two. He would take a group of students from Friends' Central and Baltimore Friends to the Soviet Union every spring break. And so my first exposure was as a junior in high school in Brezhnev's Soviet Union. And the kids that we were with were a little bit wild. One of the girls I was assigned to as a roommate initially in Moscow was from Baltimore Friends.

Our last day in Moscow, in March 1979, we went to the circus, and the roommate hung back and kind of fell in love with a circus performer from Central Asia. She brought him into the hotel. And in those days, you had to have a *пропуск* (a pass) to be able to get into the hotel. They were able to get in once when, apparently, they went up to our hotel room and then went back out onto Red Square. The second time they tried to enter the hotel, they got picked up by the police. There was a police station underneath the hotel you see. With great drama, the Central Asian ended up being taken away in a van that had the Russian word "*хлеб*" (bread) on the side of it. We had no idea what happened to him.

It started this whole spiral, wherever we'd go, the police would be calling up the kids and bringing them down to the police station under our hotels, at the "Tbilisi Hotel"—next—and then the "Leningrad Hotel." So we had some first-hand exposure to Brezhnev's Soviet Union, and it stayed with me. Then in college, I ended up majoring in history, and my senior essay was on the American liberal and left's (mis)perception of Stalin in the 1930s. I was really focused on the show trials and why it wasn't completely clear to American journalists what was going on with these so-called trials. I think there

was a long sort of intellectual marination, if you will, in and around the Soviet dissident movement for me, and then, of course, the Soviet Union collapses. And then I'm working for NDI, and I will tell you that, obviously the work for NDI was about political parties, burgeoning civil society, elections. And every once in a while, we would come across this organization called "Memorial," which was devoted to the memory of Stalin's victims. And I was puzzled, like, why? What was this about? And why were people focused on that? And I will say, in retrospect, we who were focused on democracy in Russia should have been spending a lot more time on historical memory and—I eventually then go on to do a lot of work with them later, and I'll get to that in a second. That work was so incredibly important to whether or not post-Soviet Russia would have the rule of law or not. How you feel about the dictator—you can't have rule of law and nostalgia for the dictator. It just doesn't work.

Just one last note, after the 1994–1995 NDI experience, I came back to the US—I'm teaching, and my dissertation advisor from Columbia, Jack Snyder, gets a grant from the Carnegie Corporation. And then Jack hires me to run a project that becomes a peer-reviewed edited volume from Columbia University Press that assesses the impact of democracy assistance in East/Central Europe and Eurasia, called *The Power and Limits of NGOs*. Then I wrote a bunch of additional articles on the experience. So it was—

Q: So was the NDI gig related to—was it a USAID grant, or was it—

MENDELSON: It was a Carnegie Corporation grant so we were taking a critical look across the region of the support by a number of different donors.

Q: When you were actually in Moscow?

MENDELSON: The edited volume came after the Moscow/NDI experience. But in articles, I touched on NDI and USAID.

Q: Was that your first exposure to USAID?

MENDELSON: Yes, working for NDI which was funded by USAID was my first exposure to USAID.

Q: What did this new organization that's funding you, dealing with USA democracy officers, feel like to someone who was coming to this relatively cold?

MENDELSON: The environment has a little bit more context. The NDI gig came up because Mike (Michael) McFaul and Donna Norton (his wife) were moving to Moscow in fall 1994, and they were close friends urging me to apply for the NDI job and then basically saying "You should do this!" Donna, a lawyer, was the rule of law program officer at USAID/Moscow, and Jeannie Burgault was the boss. And so we had this little community of Mike, Donna, and Jeannie, where we were just sort of exploring Moscow, evolving from one thing to another. It was very—for us, it was a really exciting time. I know there's a tremendous amount of pain that Russians were experiencing in this

transition. McFaul was just in DC because he has a new book out, and there was a book party, and it was basically expat Moscow 1990s, and a lot of discussion of how upbeat and hopeful that time was from our perspective. I will also tell you that the expats working the nonprofit sector were mainly women, and then every once in a while, we'd see these well-dressed American men who were working the privatization side, making money and being paid a lot more.

Q: And anything from the book you did about the NGO sector that either in retrospect or at the time, stands out?

MENDELSON: The book is fairly critical. It's called *The Power and Limits of NGOs*. I also did two articles in the journal *International Security* that come off that experience that are very much about Russia being between a failure and success. It was very clear, as we were working on this book, in the 1998 to 2002 period that it's freighted, particularly after Putin comes to power, almost immediately. And I was also very focused on the second war in Chechnya. So by the time the book had come out, I'd really pivoted to an explicit focus on human rights abuses in Russia. Whatever glimmers of hope I had had on the election front—I had observed multiple elections in Russia, beginning with the Duma (parliamentary) election in December 1995, the presidential one in summer 1996, then elections in 1999 and 2000. So I can see the whole evolution of the electoral system, sometimes coming with an NDI delegation, sometimes as an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observer. And you could see the democratic experiment was going down already. Then there's the beginning of closing space, where the Peace Corps is thrown out in 2003. A friend of ours, an American woman, had been running the Solidarity Center, obviously also a USAID grantee—and she'd been living in the Soviet Union and Russia since, I think, 1988 or 1989 and this is 2003, and she's coming back from holiday, and she is stopped at the airport in Moscow and put on a plane to Paris, and that's it. As soon as that started to happen, I was pretty certain there was going to be a follow-on effect.

I had moved to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in September 2001, and I had started doing survey work in Russia around that time, and I had this idea for a major project, which I initially thought we would do with NDI, and it was to try and understand how Russians thought about human rights issues using focus groups and surveys. Colleagues and I presented the idea at lunch in the spring of 2002 at the NDI office. NDI, as it turned out, was not at all interested in this idea, but some younger folks from Memorial were, so we ended up doing that work with them for several years. I wrote the first grant from USAID to a Russian human rights organization with Susan Reichle as the program officer. That grant ran from 2002 fall through probably 2004 or 2006, and we had multiple other donors supporting the work including the Ford Foundation, the Mott Foundation, and a couple of others. So it was a big, big project.

Q: And that was looking at the focus groups on Russian attitudes towards human rights, democracy, etc?

MENDELSON: Basically, we ran as close to a—it wasn't quite a randomized control trial— but we did dozens of focus groups followed by several large, random sample surveys in a number of towns, and then did a strategic communications campaign in some of the towns around how Russians thought about the war in Chechnya. Because the way Memorial was talking about the war, they were really focused on the human rights abuse of the military. In the focus groups, and I'm talking about dozens of focus groups, people would cry when they were talking about the war in Chechnya. It was absolutely something that was top of mind. But what they cared about, and which was then verified in the large, random sample surveys that we did through the Levada Center, what they cared about were military casualties and the cost of the war, which is what Americans were also worried about during the war in Iraq.

And so we were trying to argue that if you rephrased your work on this issue, if you talked about in Russian, how many casualties and how much did this cost is the same word *сколько*, you could reach people. The data suggested that few people were moved by the human rights abuses of the military. And there was another factor, an indigenous human rights organization, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers that was really respected, and they were making the case that 25,000 had been killed, and the government was saying some other lower number that was bogus. And so we ran a strategic communications campaign. We had a graphic artist, we had posters put up, and a campaign asking how much did this war cost and how many had died? *The Economist* wrote a whole story about it, and the journalist claimed that eventually the Ministry of Defense started to publish the actual number of casualties, and the second war in Chechnya wound down. I think the long-term effect really was that the campaign affected some of the younger generation in Memorial who felt that they had to be listening and responding to people—as in the strategic communications aspect was really critical. So it's all written up in an article in the journal *Post Soviet Affairs*.

Q: So I'm trying to take you up now till the time you joined USAID in 2009–10. Is there anything else during that period that stands out in terms of your work, or your observations of what was going on at USAID at the time, or within the US foreign policy structure more generally? As you know, as Obama's elected in 2009 and you're thinking about possibly joining the administration. What was it that was sort of on your mind at that time? Was it strictly Russia, or were there other pieces of it too?

MENDELSON: So, in the fall of 2006 I was in St. Petersburg, and I was with the then head of the Ford Foundation in Moscow, and we were walking through the cemetery where all the dead from the Siege of Leningrad are buried and my colleague, Steven Solnick, who now runs the Davis Center at Harvard, turned to me and he said, "You know, it's never going to happen in our professional lifetime," meaning we're not going to see a democratic Russia. And we both said, "we have to broaden our book of business." So a couple months later, I stood up the Human Rights Initiative at CSIS and that work included a non-partisan Task Force on how to close Guantanamo. So if I started at CSIS the week before 9/11 coming in with a big human rights agenda abroad, not having to do with counterterrorism, by the time I stood up this human rights program, I couldn't not be engaged in this topic. So issues around the Americans being involved in detention—in

indefinite detention and torture—really were top of mind. And it really says something that a really mainstream, non-partisan think tank like CSIS would take this topic on. But we took it on in part because John Bellinger, the then legal advisor to the Secretary of State, asked us in a convening—we had a convening that included people from Congress, all the main human rights organizations. And he basically said, "help us think through this."

By 2008, both presidential candidates were talking about closing Guantanamo. CSIS released the blueprint for how to do that for public comment in July 2008 and the final version in September 2008. Now, as a citizen, I was also on the multilateral policy campaign team. So I and another woman were running the close Guantanamo piece for the campaign, and on the first–second day of his administration, President Obama signed the executive order which was formed from the backbone of the task force that I ran at CSIS. Of course, we know today it is still open.

Then in spring 2009 the Obama administration announced they would hold a summit in July 2009. McFaul was the senior director for Russia in the National Security Council. I convinced him that if they were going to do a summit, they needed a parallel civil society summit. So in about sixty days, I raised funds with a few other colleagues to organize the summit with Americans who were working on various issues (yes, torture and detention, but also maternal mortality, and housing) in the US and Russians who were working on the same issues in Russia in a bid to nudge the foreign assistance complex to work differently. I then wrote a CSIS report advancing this different model and engaged numerous USAID colleagues who told me it had made a difference in how they thought about the work.

Meanwhile, in 2009, until very late in the year, there's no political hiring at USAID and the State Department is, with one or two exceptions, populated by political appointees all from the Clinton campaign. So there's no real entry point in 2009 until I got a call in early 2010—I think it actually was the same day as the Haiti earthquake, where a State Department person says, "We're just getting our first White House recommendations from the Obama people. Would you be interested in a USAID position?"

Q: Tell us a little bit about the position that you occupied. You were the Deputy Assistant Administrator in what we call then the DCHA Bureau: Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance. What were your responsibilities and assumptions as you took on that role?

MENDELSON: So let me just say that was not the first job I was offered. The first job I was offered was to be the Assistant Administrator of the Europe/Eurasia Bureau, which required a Senate confirmation, and while my husband was a political appointee in the Pentagon in a position that didn't require Senate confirmation, it turned out that we had filed late in one of our recent tax years, and the administration was extremely sensitive to that issue. I got a call on April 1, 2010 saying in very dramatic terms, that "there was blood on the floor," and that I was "thrown under the bus" and that the FBI background investigations would stop immediately. And I thought that was it. But the USAID White

House liaison told Raj Shah, the administrator, about the situation, and he said, “I don't care about her taxes; find something else for her.” And so they came to me with the Deputy Assistant Administrator (DAA) job, which I’d been told about previously by our dear friend Sally Kux, who had in the State Department, worked in the F Bureau, overseeing these DRG accounts. She and I had known one another for years because I’d been writing on the topic of foreign assistance ever since the NDI experience. I’d been talking to State and USAID for years about different ways of doing democracy work. She’s like, “This is a great job that no one knows about.” And sure enough, it was.

Q: Say a little bit about your impressions coming in, what you wanted to accomplish in terms of the job, and then we'll get into some of the bureaucratics around it.

MENDELSON: So this was my first time in government, number one. Number two, when I initially came in, on May 10, 2010, we had an acting AA, who was Susan Reichle (who I had worked with in Moscow in the 2000s). So the White House obviously had to be on board with me being considered. But Susan was also from the inside encouraging me. And Susan is a master at management. She’s a former Mission Director. She has decades of experience within USAID. So she was an amazing, sort of initial point of contact, and obviously we had worked together previously. What I first did was a sort of ninety day listening tour. I was trying to understand what this office was, and also the person who was the director of the office was a holdover from the previous administration, a former Hill staffer that I had worked with very closely on combating human trafficking, so I had really good initial points of contact. We did the listening tour, and I got a bee in my bonnet that this office should be a separate bureau, and that it should absolutely elevate human rights.

I knew that there was a lot of USAID work on human rights, so I had two—oh—there was a third, sorry, three goals. One was, have this office separate from DCHA, right? DCHA was a bureau that had at least two, if not more, really competing cultures, the world’s best-in-class, disaster response teams, who have a go-bag with them at all times, and this much longer-term development work on democracy, human rights, and governance, and it was a real clash. But the other thing is, my impression from all those interviews was that I had a lot of people who were overly attached to funding mechanisms, but it was unclear how the mechanisms really added up. I also felt that I knew that there was a lot of work going on in the missions that was human rights focused, and there was no real node in this office on human rights. And the third thing was empirically being able to show what works and what doesn’t work. So out of this came the idea that this part of DCHA, whether it’s in DCHA or outside of DCHA, needs to be this repository of what works and what doesn’t work, and advising the missions on democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG).

Most of the DRG money is out in the missions, but you’ve got 100 people, say, and 110 million dollars to spend from Washington. I thought we needed to really have a judicious way of thinking about how to do this well and have some empirical evidence. So I’m in the middle of a trip to the Rift Valley in Kenya in October 2010 when I get a phone call from the then chief of staff at USAID, also a former NDI guy, who says “stand down on

this separate bureau idea." All summer, I've been working my way up the chain of command about how this office should become a bureau, and I've got everybody up to the consular level who's the most senior career Foreign Service Officer saying yes, when all of a sudden the Senate confirms the actual incoming AA and the chief of staff is calling me to say, "You can't do this separate thing. You can create whatever center you want. Go through the proper channels, but this center is not leaving DCHA. She (Nancy Lindborg, the incoming AA) is not going to allow this." And so boom, I encounter my first real bureaucratic hurdle. What I didn't know was, at the same time, the Secretary of State was trying to take other parts of DCHA and move them to the State Department, and so the new AA was doing what most bureaucratic or politically smart animals do, which is preserve their territory. We had a rough beginning.

Q: Did you know her before at all, or you knew her first in the context of this job?

MENDELSON: The first time I met her was a brief interview that summer. We had one interview, and I think she was not pleased that I was there. I think she saw me as an academic. It all changed on the day when Ben Ali fled Tunisia, and my husband and I were driving to New Jersey to see my mother-in-law, and I happened to notice that there was an email chain with the White House, that this dictatorship was ending, and Nancy was not on the email chain.

Q: This is already December 2010?

MENDELSON: This was January 15, 2011, and my husband, who had a lot of experience in government, said, "You need to call Nancy and tell her about this." It's a Saturday, and I'm like, "Why would I? I can't!" and he's like, "No, no, you have got to call her." And he was right. And everything turned after that, and we became one team, and we are still very close to this day. So it was a great call on his part. She and I were both getting comfortable in roles that were very different from what we'd had before. I'd never had a boss, ever. In academia and a think tank, you're not really dealing with that.

Q: Start with those first three, and then we'll talk a little bit about more specific stuff. The DCHA Bureau remained DCHA basically, until 2022 with the existing configuration—human rights. Maybe say a word about what you wanted to see emerge, given that there was already human rights work being done at USAID, but how did you want to transform that? And then some on the, well, put broadly, as some of the efficacy evaluation, making sure the projects programs were actually achieving the results.

MENDELSON: Clearly, I had come into the job with a very strong focus on human rights, knowing that USAID is doing this work, but for some reason, they were not talking about it, and that struck me as unfortunate. But there was another motivation that was even stronger, which was that I was then already worried about NGOs being disconnected from the populations that they're meant to serve, and that as an accelerant to this closing space, I was very worried. And, it turned out, it came to pass. I think a colleague and I wrote this in maybe 2006 or 2007: if these activists aren't beginning to focus on the local population, they will be extinct. And nearly twenty years later, in the

case of Russia, that is the case. So my fear was that there was already a shifting view on assistance. The idea of, quote, "foreign assistance" was becoming more and more problematic. I knew this from my experience, but I was worried that it was going to metastasize, and sure enough, it did.

Q: So I was asking more about human rights. But I am curious about—maybe we'll get back into this, as we talk about where we are today in terms of foreign assistance—the human rights front. What was the thing that you wanted to see happen at USAID that wasn't there when you got there vis-à-vis human rights?

MENDELSON: I really wanted widespread use—and this also comes to combating human trafficking work—I wanted to see more use of large, random sample surveys that were built off of focus groups to elicit from a population what the actual issues were that they cared about. I was worried that there was a disconnect between donors in Washington, New York, and Geneva driving agendas that were separate or disconnected from those that the local populations were really interested in and focused on. I come out of this Euro-Atlantic human rights movement that was very much shaped by the Cold War and the Helsinki Accords. So a focus on freedom from torture and detention, as opposed to a focus on socio-economic rights. And I think that over time that became a blind spot for the human rights movement generally. And, now a decade or more later, I think it's an ever growing problem as democracies are not delivering for large swaths of populations, including here at home.

So I wanted to see more quantitative work. I wanted to see—I was a big fan of randomized control trials, and those skills didn't necessarily match what was going on in missions. Plus the way in which the funding worked, there were partners that were not local. They were the NDIs, the IRIs (International Republican Institute), the Freedom Houses of the world, and those organizations were not built necessarily to be able to do that quantitative work, with some exceptions, and some exceptions that were problematic. I can remember, I think it was IRI in Egypt that had done some survey work that was considered problematic. I can't remember the reason why it was considered problematic. And, I should say also that, the whole focus group and survey work for me came from Les Campbell, who I was matched up with at NDI/Moscow. So, it came from my original NDI experience, as opposed to my own academic background. It just seemed a really practical way to do work, but it didn't match the culture or the skills of a lot of democracy officers in the field.

Q: And so how did you attempt to rationalize that?

MENDELSON: Well, you work slowly in creating different mechanisms for change. We also carved out money for human rights defenders. We carved out money for—really trying to find local human rights organizations. So, for example, we were really aided in the case of Zimbabwe, where we had a local hire working at USAID who was a human rights activist, who knew the community. And so in that case, we were able to do really, tremendous, tremendous work with some amazing human rights activists. But, in a place like Egypt, it's a totally different story. It's almost impossible to generalize across the

sector, but maybe if I can explain a little bit more, if we get into like my specific priorities and what we were able to achieve. So we've talked about going from Democracy & Governance (DG) to Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) and trying to drive it to be more empirical. And we got a lift, actually, we got mention of this new DRG center in the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) that came out in December 2010. So I had some kind of bureaucratic top cover which the State Department was running. But as you know, they were consulting with USAID, and for whatever reason, the person at State who had the pen liked this idea of the DRG center. And so it stuck, and then we were able to do a new DRG strategy and then eventually the work included work on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). So there was a broadening of not only the DRG work but really looping it into the broader global development agenda.

I also came in with a very specific set of priorities. One of them was moving the combating human trafficking work to the new DRG center. I had been working on combating human trafficking since 1999 and had a lot of contact with the USAID folks on that agenda, but it was exclusively focused on gender and sex trafficking. There was no link to labor trafficking, and I'd done work on trafficking in the context of peacekeeping operations. I made the case to the powers that be to move the work to the DRG Center, and the person who had the remit at the time made the case for keeping it where it was, and the powers that be decided in my favor. And then we did a series of things that did not involve money but elevated our focus on the issue. We wrote a code of conduct for the agency which it turned out Secretary Clinton really liked. We had new training for contractors. While it doesn't seem like you would have to really tell people that you shouldn't be involved in force, fraud, or coercion, actually we needed that training.

Then we wrote this new strategy to guide the agency in its work combating human trafficking, and it coincided with the need for deliverables at the White House. So the White House launched—I mean this is very unusual—our USAID CTIP strategy, and then a couple months later, we got the President out on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly, giving his, as it turned out, his first and only speech on combating human trafficking. But that kind of thing was bureaucratic gold. If you get the president's attention, it enables me to then say to others in the agency, this is a priority for the president.

Q: Sarah, maybe say a word about the strategy—the initial strategy that had been developed back in 1994. This was the first revision twenty years in. What changed?

MENDELSON: I started working on the trafficking remit in 1999 and 2000 and by 2010 we knew that the initial numbers, for example, of how many people around the world were trafficked were more or less guess work. So again, the survey worked, really having an understanding of who was experiencing this trauma would be helpful. If we had people in missions that were interested in working on this issue, trying to get some money to them, to be able to survey local populations. To have an actual estimate on the number of females, for example, who had been trafficked—which I had done in

Russia—what exactly are the experiences of females ages, say, eighteen to thirty two and then generating a percentage of these, that population that has actually experienced this. But also, really bringing the labor trafficking piece in and understanding, then working with—if you've got a mission that has a huge amount of money working on agriculture in, say, Ghana. They're focused on either fisheries or cocoa. Having embedded into those missions an understanding of labor trafficking in those markets, which we knew were very prevalent. That was generally a strategy across DRG that you wanted to sort of try and get people out of their silos, that somebody says, "I do agriculture, but I don't have anything to do with human rights." And you say, no, actually, it's much more complicated than that. There's forced labor in both the fisheries and cocoa farming. That's an example.

Q: Can you give a specific example of whether it's trafficking or human rights? More broadly, you felt it was then integrated into the development work that USAID was doing at the field level in various missions.

MENDELSON: I think that the example I just gave of the fisheries—and we actually had a documentary that was made with USAID funding that was really quite powerful. And we were partnering with Humanity United. We were partnering with other organizations that also worked internationally on these issues. So I think we made some progress expanding it in some ways, sort of the agriculture-human rights-labor trafficking examples, was an easier one than others.

I'm going to tell you a failure that then sort of pivoted to something else. I came in with this idea. I'd done a lot of work on historical memory, how countries reconcile with dictatorships or not, and how that affects the development of democracy, but also the rule of law and governance. And I thought this was a huge development issue, so I came up with this acronym, RAJI: Remembrance, Accountability, Justice, Initiative. But of course, the name was way too close to Rajiv Shah.

Q: Rajiv the head of USAID?

MENDELSON: Right. But I had a really helpful team who essentially looked around the missions at the kind of transitional justice work that had been going on. So a ton of work in the Latin American space, obviously, and work in East/Central Europe and beyond. And I tried to marshal the work to say to USAID, "look, you're already doing this work." So let's elevate it, because it's actually a critical piece to cementing the rule of law. That's what we did broadly with human rights. That's what we did on transitional justice. Just as we're kind of revving up to do this remembrance and accountability work, we get an executive order from the White House that we have, like, 100 days or so to put together an atrocity prevention exercise, an atrocity prevention board, and the same people and the same missions that are working on transitional justice now need to do this atrocity prevention work.

So we pivot to that, because we have to. And it's not the same thing, but it's related, and it took the same experts. But in that case, we were looking for ways of tying in

technology and innovation. And when the atrocity prevention board was announced, the White House was also looking for a lot of deliverables. And so in an extremely short time period, like a matter of days—I was literally sitting on a beach for spring break when I made the call—we partnered with Humanity United to leverage funds from USAID and that philanthropy. And we issued a "tech challenge" where we were looking for NGOs to harness technology to do atrocity prevention work. We ran a competition. We had external jurors, and they picked, I don't know, three groups, and the one I remember had to do with the Democratic Republic of the Congo. And, did we end violence in atrocities in the DRC? No. I wanted to talk about one or two other sorts of efforts that were quite tangible.

You and I were very involved in how you deal with the closing space issue. By 2010 or 2012, it's becoming an epidemic. And I want to tie this empirically back to the Arab Awakening, which happened in the spring of 2011, and Putin's response to these events and his thinking that we were behind it. That Hillary Clinton was behind it. Putin's thinking: there's no way that these movements across the Middle East are spontaneous, that and he is, himself, very unhappy with how then President Medvedev is handling all of this. And Putin announces in September 2011 that he's going to return to the presidency. He was a prime minister at the time, and over winter 2011 to winter 2012 or January, February 2012 thousands of people took to the streets in Russia. And again, he's convinced this is Hillary Clinton behind all this. And in July 2012 the parliament passes a law about foreign assistance and foreign agents, and then Russia goes on vacation for August and then September 10, 2012 on the margins of ASEAN, Foreign Minister Lavrov tells Secretary Clinton that the USAID Russia mission will close in twenty days after twenty years, and nobody in the US Administration pushes back. Raj doesn't push back, the secretary doesn't push back, the president doesn't push back.

And I seriously think about quitting USAID, because I think if that happens, it's going to give permission to other countries to do this. So we quickly convened on the margins of UNGA—actually at Human Rights Watch—and brainstormed, and we came up with the idea of a civil society center based in Prague that would help activists in the region. And we got public-private funding for that, and it's still going, but it was painful. I mean, the 2012 exodus of USAID from Russia was then followed by pretty much every group that had been there since the early 1990s. That era of opening was closing.

Q: So now you know, 15 years later, what do you think can be done to push back against a Putin-like figure who wants to expel USAID? What was the alternative that you would have preferred even before the center in Prague?

MENDELSON: That's a good but hard question. I think this really gets to this issue of international development versus global development and making sure that we have systems or models that are best-in-class, here at home in the US, and that we are drawing on best-in-class from other places and applying them here. So it's not just a case of, what could you do about Putin? I do think everything vis-a-vis Russia becomes much harder with the full-on invasion by Russia into Ukraine, which then sets hundreds of thousands of people leaving Russia. But I thought at the time, back in 2012, that we needed some

serious thinking about how to support activists in exile, a sort of Keep Hope Alive response.

I would also say that what became very clear over time was that there were certain ingredients needed for democracy support to be successful. People don't remember it now, but you know, Estonia had a USAID mission at one point. Estonia is a fully functioning democracy, an e-government, and a technology leader. A member of NATO and the EU. And how did they get there? They are both blessed and cursed with being a small country, a small state. But the secret there was that the government and the population were moving in the same direction. They were obviously occupied territories for decades, and when the Soviet Union collapsed—and even before the Soviet Union collapsed—they were intent on driving West.

In a place like Egypt, where the dictator falls, but the military has so much control over the economy, and even after the dictator falls, and it's unclear what the population wants, you're not going to see that sort of transition.

I think that we had in Kenya—you've written about it—another interesting example. It's a much storied example: the way the interagency functioned so very well around the 2013 Kenyan elections, starting in 2010 and all the way through. President Obama had the authority and gave the charge of "no detail too small. We're not going to see a replay of the election-related violence from December 2007–January 2008." There was an exceptionally good donor group on the ground. There were exceptionally good Kenyan activists who were absolutely in-touch with local populations. I remember, I think it was a place called "Burnt Forest"—a little town in the Rift Valley. More people in that town knew about the International Criminal Court than people inside the Washington beltway. So it was sort of a moment in time that was quite extraordinary, as opposed to a lack of coordination in the interagency, or at least between State and USAID that was practically a verbal equivalent of hand-to-hand combat around democracy work in Egypt, which was, of course, deeply complicated by the Egyptian government minister in charge of international cooperation, Fayza Aboulnaga.

Q: Let me ask you about the one big—I mean, you mentioned that twice in passing. But let me ask you more specifically about the Arab Spring, I mean, which was obviously a big issue during your tenure in DCHA. Both at the time you talked about just sort of getting involved, but what do you remember in terms of things that we did, that worked out, things that we could have done that we didn't do? How do you look back on that period? I mean, today, it looks pretty grim in many ways, but, how do you look back on that time? In your perch as the head of the democracy team in DCHA.

MENDELSON: We did a few things that were, I think, tactically smart. First of all, we had a very specific situation going on within the agency. The regional bureau, for whatever reason, really deferred to DCHA in this case. So we had a lot of latitude initially in DCHA to work with mission directors on thinking through strategies and so

we had two mission directors meetings, one in Doha, one in Morocco. Doha in February and Morocco, I think, in May, where we all more or less got on the same page, at least, we built relationships. You obviously had had relationships with all these people, but I didn't. And also none of these people had had professional experience in countries that were going through political transitions. There was both enabling leadership within DCHA and the Middle East and North Africa Bureau to let us be involved, and then there was, to varying degrees, openness within the mission directors to acknowledging: we haven't seen this movie before, but you have. What do you think it is we ought to be doing?

But the contexts are so varied: Egypt was totally different from Tunisia. If I were to do it all over again, I would have absolutely doubled down in Tunisia. I think that we had a really specific moment, and then this gets to the other larger issues. There was, I think, within the democracy community, there was a lot of tension around the degree to which we really needed to focus on socio-economic issues. I think it was Ken Wollack who said to me about Tahrir Square, I can't remember the exact combination of quotes but something like, "yes they're calling for bread, but they're also calling for freedom." And I think that the democracy community had a tendency to only hear the freedom part. They downplayed the bread part. And ultimately, for Tunisia, this new democracy had to deliver. Making that understanding, that socio-economic part as a political issue, becomes really enormously critical.

The Egypt equation was so complicated by the geopolitical—what the Gulf states were going to do, the amount of money that eclipsed what we could do, obviously, you know the relationship with Israel. So Egypt, in some ways, is a separate context. But Tunisia, it's sort of like, I think in some ways it could have been possible, maybe not the Estonia of the Middle East, but there was more latitude.

Q: We all thought it was going to be like that, and then, it turned out to be very different. I think that's at least one of the lessons I draw, which is that despite, even our best efforts, things sometimes don't work out.

MENDELSON: Yes, and we were stymied. We had bitter fights with the State Department. We need to recognize also that by September 2012 not only was there Benghazi, but there was an attack on the embassy in Tunisia, and the International School. So there was a terrorism front there too. There was no USAID mission in Tunisia, and then there's a real inter-agency fight with the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) about the work, and then the Office of Transition Initiatives (USAID/DCHA/OTI) is doing its own thing there. Which we haven't talked about at all, but in my exposure to OTI—and this is an unfashionable and politically incorrect thing to say—but I found their way of working not always helpful. They were often untethered. I saw this particularly in Kenya. They had no link to the larger context—so they're working with mothers, for example,, and they have no idea that mothers internationally have played huge roles in Chile or Russia or they're working with torture victims, and they have no understanding that in Nairobi, there's a Center for the Victims of Torture.

Q: I was actually about to get to this question of relations. You talked a little bit about the relation with the Middle East Bureau. Now you're mentioning OTI. You alluded to the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL). Obviously, this set of interviews focused on the DRG center, but just how do you see these competing or collaborating spheres, working with DRG, and how would you suggest, even for a future, structuring these relationships with it? There is this challenge of either—and you've heard the argument, I assume too, of just pulling DRG out, making it separate—or giving everything to the National Endowment for Democracy, and just having it as a separate democracy agency for democratic development, as opposed to integrating it within USAID. And so I'm just curious, now how do you reflect on those issues?

MENDELSON: I'm very involved in reimagining development now, and I'll get to that in a second. We had really good relationships with the Africa Bureau at USAID. And, when I think about the comparisons, a lot of this is personality. We had initially a terrible relationship between DRG and DRL at State, and it had absolutely everything to do with the assistant secretary at the time who made the USAID deputy administrator wait for forty minutes before meeting him. He had just complete disregard for USAID, extremely unhelpful. He'd come from a human rights organization that didn't understand at all what USAID did. And in some ways, there was a kind of magical thinking that DRL wasn't actually part of the U.S. government, and that somehow, we were bad and enabling human rights abuse but somehow DRL wasn't. And it literally flipped as soon as that assistant secretary left, and there was a foreign service officer who was the acting one, the relationship completely shifted so that the impact of people, individuals, you can't underestimate this. I mean, this is true in diplomacy. This is true in any inter-governmental aspect.

I think part of the good relationship with the Africa Bureau was in part because there were some officers that had been in the old DG office and had migrated to the Africa Bureau. The Africa Bureau had a much stronger cohort of democracy folks. And yeah, it was the Latin America team that seemed to be almost hermetically sealed. They were very difficult to engage. Asia was up and down. It depended on what was going on. So I would say our strongest partners were in the Africa Bureau.

Q: Maybe just say a little bit more about the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) relationship. How do you see that, both at the time and even in the reimagining?

MENDELSON: My perspective on the NED had to do with my experience working with Memorial in Russia and not so much from USAID. CSIS was a sub-grantee to Memorial, but Memorial was also getting a tiny amount of NED money, and it was absolutely laborious; with the NED you've got the same amount of reporting for $25,000 as you do for a $200,000 or $800,000 grant. There was an enormous amount of micromanaging from staff at the NED. After USAID was kicked out in October 2012, we organized a meeting at the MacArthur Foundation with the NED and all sorts of foundations that were still working in Russia, and the NED sitting across from me—oh and DRL was there—the NED, which gets all of its money appropriated by Congress passed through the State Department to the NED—and in another country, we call that a GONGO

(Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization)—the NED representative says "Oh what happened to you, USAID, is never going to happen to us. It has nothing to do with us." DRL thinks the same thing. Everybody in the room thinks the same, "oh, that was just USAID." I just think that's magical thinking.

I think that the model, and I've written about this in a bunch of different places over at least since 2020, if not sooner, the model of the NED, NDI, IRI, I think, has been overtaken by events. I think that we never really adjusted to the post-Cold War era. I think these models are out of date. I think that, frankly, the global framework around sustainable development recognizes that development happens everywhere. We are having enormous problems delivering democracy in this country, there's growing inequality in a number of democracies, and it's just not credible to me to have the NDIs of the world walking around. Nobody wants to hear about elections from us, and to have that expertise not recognizing the links between food, health, human rights, and democracy delivering, I think, is deeply problematic.

But I also think that there's a lack of understanding in a lot of human rights groups of what USAID did. I'll give you one example. I was at a meeting at New York University last spring, and a woman who'd worked at a number of big, famous human rights organizations, she was talking, talking, talking, and all of a sudden she said something like, "Well, I'm not going to die on a hill for USAID." And the whole purpose of the meeting that we were at was to discuss new approaches, and reframing human rights. And so I have two fingers up and I say, "you know, we're at a meeting where we recognize, unlike the U.S. government, that access to food and health are human rights issues, and the collapse of USAID is going to result in famine and people dying. These are human rights crises that we're going to be experiencing." No response from her. The next day, this young Filipino comes up to me and he said, "I want to thank you for what you said about USAID. When we heard what was going on, my friends and I got together and we pulled out our HIV meds to see how much we had, for how long, and who would be flying from the Philippines to Thailand to buy more. So this is absolutely real for us."

Q: Yeah, it's sort of part of my evolution, also from human rights to democracy to USAID over, you know, a fifteen year period. Let me ask you, I mean, you talked a little bit about the role of Memorial is a good example of, the model, providing grants to local organizations. And clearly that was part of Raj's agenda, part of Samantha Power's agenda, part of Mark Green's agenda. Where do you think we fall short? Again, as you're looking to the future, what can be done to address that issue? In terms of international versus local implementers.

MENDELSON: I'll answer this in two ways. First of all, Congress was the largest inhibitor to being able to support more expansively, local organizations. But you also need to have local organizations that are then actually listening to the population, rather than the donor. I mean, ultimately, if Memorial had had a different business model, where they were much more engaged with the local population, things might look different now for them—maybe. Russia is a big country, and imagine if the local population is putting in $1 or $5. Russia is not a—I mean, there are pockets of poverty—but it's not an

inherently poor place, actually. Putin is driving the economy into the ground, with the war, but the donor was getting in the way of the interface between the NGO and the local population. I think that is a problem. So let me tell you about an experiment that we're trying to do. We call it the "Data Commons and the Pittsburgh Pilot." What we're trying to do is make sure that the nonprofit community is not left behind as AI takes off. So we have five NGOs that have agreed to coordinate with a data scientist we're hiring to figure out what data they have and to build essentially an AI sandbox, an open-source tool that reveals in real time what needs the local population is having. These are a small curated group. They do real stuff, and then we have a connection with the local government to be able to share the data and try and get responses. And of course, there's lots of philanthropy in Pittsburgh.

We have colleagues in Atlanta, in Providence, in Baltimore, that are interested in this model. The people I work with have worked internationally, and we would ideally like, if we have something that works, to be able to scale it up. But I think the idea is that the old model, it's not going to come back. I don't know if it should come back. We're trying to think of other kinds of philanthropy. One idea that we have is that professional sports teams all have foundations, but they don't always have good ways of actually spending the money, and yet they also are embedded in local communities. Is there a way that we can harness that wealth to be actually doing more to support local organizations?

Q: It's interesting. They do have foundations, but they have, obviously, incredible access to communications. Because they're all over the—for those of us who watch these sports—they're all over and you hear about it all the time as public service announcements, and I don't think—I haven't ever seen a real evaluation of their long term impact, their short term impact. I mean, other than these incredible stories of how these people are doing great work, helping their communities, and so, something along those lines of a serious evaluation would certainly be welcome. Even if it did challenge some of the things that they're doing right now.

MENDELSON: As in anything, it really is so dependent on individuals. I mean, we did this amazing work in Russia, then Susan Reichle rolls off to her next position, the next director who comes in, and he has no interest in advancing the work. Private founders, private donors come in, and then those donors are kicked out.

Q: And we're learning that at the very, very macro level of going from Obama to Trump to Biden to Trump. You can see how it can transform.

MENDELSON: Here's what I'm really worried about: the U.S., the United States, has become such an outlier in its approach to development even before this latest situation. Obviously, other donors are—European Donors are focused on defense. I get it, but the vast majority of the world is actually focused on sustainable development. There are only three countries in the world that have never done a Voluntary National Review—how the world communicates about the Sustainable Development Goals: Haiti, Myanmar, and the USA. Most have done multiple. All our peer nations have done multiple ones. We are somewhere between, I think it's Albania and Thailand in terms of where we exist on a

sustainable development index. I'll send you this recent piece I did for the United Nations; there's a lot of correlation between prosperity, conflict, and where you are on this Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) index. I mean, like on multiple indices. So we've lost more than a step in terms of, obviously, as a bilateral donor, but even as an example.

Q: Absolutely, I mean you see it across the board.

MENDELSON: Across the board: life expectancy, maternal mortality, food insecurity, poverty, inequality, all in the United States. This is really dire, and so we have to, in my mind, we have to get our own house in order. I'm doing another edited volume, this time for the Carnegie Mellon University Press on "imagining sustainable futures," with a focus on human rights. And a lot of the authors are focused on the local level. We really see cities playing an enormous role as hubs where democracy and human rights live. It's not that international legal frameworks aren't important, but that so much of how people experience democracy and rights is at the local level.

Q: And we're seeing it play out, politically too, in the United States. So one last question, just because I feel obliged, you know, again, you picked up a little bit on this earlier, one of the major critiques of the folks coming out of the Trump World is about the U.S. interfering in electoral politics and domestic politics of other countries in a critical way. So, whereas we always thought we were doing God's work, they're saying we're undermining folks who were elected, even if we have concerns about them. Whether it's Orban or Maduro or even Putin. And again, it seems to have resonated, at least with some, that this is a critique of our programs in the democracy space, that we should rethink. And I'm just curious how you react to the critiques.

MENDELSON: I think generally the critique is overblown. I mean, it's sort of like, you know, Putin thinking that we were behind the street demonstrations in 2011 and 2012 in Russia. It's just not that simple.

Q: But I mean, in some sense, do you think we're partly to blame? Because we sometimes like to take too much credit for those things—read some of the things, even going back to the 1980s. And you know, how much—say, Chile—I mean, you know and again, overblown. I mean, it wasn't the case the Chileans really did it on their own, with some support. But if you read some of the, you know, documents generated here, you'd say, "wow."

MENDELSON: I think that there's a vicious circle where you're running an NGO, if you're dependent on Congressional funding, and you need to make an argument of how effective the funding is, and I think that that has led to a really strange place. Truly speaking, this model of Congressional money to the NGOs is exactly the thing that we criticize in other places. So we need to interrogate this notion and this business model. I think, though, that this kind of external assistance is most effective as I noted before. I know they're not a lot of Estonias in the world, but there are examples where the

locals—the population of a country and the government—are moving in the same direction.

That is the story of much of Central and Eastern Europe. And in those cases, external funding, whether from the Ford Foundation or USAID, can have a big impact. You know, you need to be really, sort of completely self-aware that if you're funding in an environment where there's a dictator, and it's a handful of activists, basically, you know, why are you doing this? I mean, this is as long as the U.S. government has been around, almost. Are you doing this—is it an instrument of foreign policy? Or is it, are you doing this for ethical reasons?

Q: The argument that's made, whether it's in Cuba or elsewhere, is that, hey, you know the population is being repressed. And there are folks who are trying to create that alliance that you're talking about. They need us to stimulate it. And do you view Cuba as an opportunity, which many on the right have traditionally done, view it as an opportunity, or do you view it as wasted resources and putting people in danger. And I think that's the dilemma that we faced, the last thirty or forty years in doing this work, in trying to find that fine line between the two.

MENDELSON: On the very specific case of Cuba, at one time, I had a friend from college who was in a law firm in Florida—this is in the 1980s—there's this anticipation that Castro will fall. Particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, that in Florida, they've got warehouses with fax machines and Xerox machines and this and that ready to be moved. It's a mind set of thinking almost any day this collapse is going to happen, and then they're going to move this equipment onto like a flotilla and bring it in. I know they always say, "dictatorships look resilient until they're not." But I don't know. I think my sense of what external groups are able to do in creating change has been really tempered by experience. But I think the Trump administration is making an argument because they don't want anybody looking at their own situation and their own behavior.

One thing we haven't talked about at all is the movement towards open government, because there's a new model even well before you get to what's happened this year, in 2025. A really organic model of both local government, participatory budgeting, and anti-corruption work that I think has got a lot of resonance, but it hasn't transformed the political situation. I mean, the decline of democracy has continued, just as Open Government Partnership (OGP), that whole movement, which started really sort of around 2010, 2011, hasn't turned the page. And, in fact, I wonder what impact has it had? I come away from the 2008 financial crisis, mapping to the decline of democracy globally. There's a trend, maybe it's a correlation, not a causation. But it's very disturbing, and I feel like that has been really a definitive moment that we didn't understand.

Q: A lot we didn't understand, and obviously a lot we didn't cover. But I think just to bring it to a close for now, any other thoughts you want to add, and then we'll close.

MENDELSON: Part of why the sustainable development goals have been meaningful to me, at least, is recognizing the intersection of these issues. I think, recognizing, if you had teams or pods, that it's not the rule of law team versus the anti-corruption team, versus some other aspect of governance. The situation I walked into was employees owning a funding mechanism and the system favoring not collaboration, not really solving for whatever problem was on the ground. And I just think, in general, we all need to do a lot more listening and responding. We need to flip the script to be demand driven, rather than supply side and the whole Congressional model, particularly having two appropriators essentially writing these budgets. That was a model that I think really outlived its time.

Q: Okay, so we're going to break here. I want to thank Sarah for her time and fascinating conversation and obviously a lot covered in terms of where we are.

End of interview