

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project
Foreign Assistance Series

VLADISLAV YASHKOV

*Interviewed by: Carol Peasley
Initial interview date: December 19, 2016
Copyright 2017 ADST*

This oral history transcription was made possible through support provided by U.S. Agency for International Development, under terms of Cooperative Agreement No. AID-OAA-F-16-00101. The opinions expressed herein are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development or the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Childhood and Early Background	
Moscow Aviation Institute (1985 – 1991)	
Aerospace Engineer at Design Bureau (1991 – 1993)	
Higher School of Economics (1993 – 1995)	
USAID/Russia	1994 – 2004
Mailroom to Financial Management Office	
Monitoring USDA Food Aid Program	
Pre-Award Survey	
Reconciling U.S. and Russian Financial Systems	
Junior Achievement Russia	
Americans Working in the Russian Environment	
FSNs: A Career?	
Russian Government Encounters – and Universality of Issue for FSNs	
Capacity Building vs. Compatibility with USAID Systems	
USAID/Iraq – Third Country National Contract	2004
Deputy Controller	
Logistics and Security – 24/7 Responsibilities	
Consolidation of Financial Management Functions in Jordan – and	
Move to Amman	
Contracting Liaison	
Payroll	
Curtailment – Embassy Security Office Restrictions	

USAID/Russia 2005
Return to Financial Analyst Position
Contractual Issues – Costs of Taking Iraq Position
Resignation and Move to Amman, Jordan

Consulting and Consulting Firm Positions 2005 – 2015
Southern Sudan – Public Finance Training
Jordan – Director of Grants and Operations and Lessons Learned
On Project Start-up and Administration
Southern Sudan – Director of Finance and Operations
Jordan – Building Fiscal Agent for MCC Water Project
Iraq – Baghdad and Erbil Projects
Jordan – Grants Manager for Civic Initiatives Support Project

Concluding Thoughts
USAID/Russia Legacy

INTERVIEW

Childhood and Early Background

Q: This is December 19th, 2016. This is Carol Peasley and I'm interviewing Vladislav Yashkov. Vlad, maybe we could get started and you could talk a little bit about your early background – when you were born, where you were born, your family background, what your parents were doing, just give us a little bit of a story about your childhood.

YASHKOV: I was born north of Moscow, at a well-known military academy for pilots. I come from a military family. My father was a military pilot, flying a strategic bomber. My parents met in Belarus. My mom is from Belarus and my father is from Moscow. I spent my first four years of my life with my grandparents mostly, from my mom's side; I was in Belarus then. My father got an assignment in Russian Far East and we moved there and lived there for four years. Then we moved to Irkutsk for a year and then came back to Moscow. By that time my father had left military service so we started living in Moscow.

I've been always passionate about flight and I love everything about airplanes. I keep going to the major air shows in Paris and Farnborough which is not far from London. I try to keep updated in this field. When I finished school, I went to study aerospace engineering in Moscow at Moscow Aviation Institute.

Q: Vlad? When did you finish high school, what year?

YASHKOV: I finished in 1984. From 1985 I was studying at the Moscow Aviation Institute. I got a degree in aerospace engineering and started working in the aerospace

field designing engines. It was the beginning of the '90s when I was working for the design bureau. It was kind of the time of big changes for my country – the breakup of the Soviet Union and all the uncertainty, particularly in the aerospace industry in Russia. One of my friends who I worked with, he told me he was going to take another degree at the Higher School of Economics. He asked me if I wanted to accompany him to take the entry exams. I thought, “Well, why not get another degree?” It would give me more options for what I would be able to do in my future, in my life. That’s when I went to study economics. While I was studying, it was full-time program - the same as at Moscow Aviation Institute – no work, full-time study.

Q: Was the Higher School of Economics new then? Or was it one of the Soviet schools of economics?

YASHKOV: It was the very first year of the school; they hadn’t had any experience before. It was brand new and it was well supported by the Russian government, Yegor Gaydar and his institute. Basically what happened with this school, it brought teachers from well-known European universities – Erasmus University in Rotterdam, Holland and Sorbonne University in France. We had amazing teachers, very up-to-date curriculum. It was really very interesting for me to go to the school. It was also quite easy to get into the school, at that time. Now, it’s almost like mission impossible – like a Russian Harvard, very difficult to get into the school because it has such a high rating and a great reputation.

Q: Was the instruction in English or Russian?

YASHKOV: It was a mix. The teachers from the Western universities were teaching in English. One of the requirements, one of the entry exams determined whether the candidate to be a student would be able to understand materials in English.

Q: So you had studied English before?

YASHKOV: Yes, in high school and university. Unless they were specialized language schools, most other schools didn’t teach many foreign languages. Where would you use them? It’s just a subject to study, to get the general idea about a language but not have it for use in practical life. But I’d passed the entry exam, so my language was sufficient to study the materials and understand the lectures.

USAID/Russia – Hired 1994

While I was studying, in my second year I started looking for a job and that’s how USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) came up. It was a funny story, how I got to know USAID. There was a message in the newspaper mentioning positions in a diplomatic mission; it didn’t even mention the country. It was before you could Google stuff on the internet; there was no internet. So I just walked to the address mentioned in the newspaper. The building was an old standard Soviet school building, in between the old U.S. embassy building and the new U.S. embassy compound. The building was by

itself. It had a plate on it that said USAID; I had no idea what it was. I didn't even know what USAID was at my second interview when I was asked to tell the interviewer why I was interested at working at USAID. I even asked, "U.S.-what?" because I didn't understand what they were talking about. Basically, I went to get a job with an employer that I had no idea who the employer was, and what it was all about.

Q: When was this? Was this 1994?

YASHKOV: Yes, 1994. It was like the second year for USAID in Russia, so they were hiring people. I didn't hear about the job itself. I was hired to the mailroom. At that time it was important; everything was paper, faxes, and old-fashion actual paper mail. But quickly I moved to the controller's (financial) office.

Q: At this point, you were still studying? You hadn't finished yet at the Higher School of Economics?

YASHKOV: Right. I was studying. It was very convenient. I had time to study after work, I could take some time from work – so it was quite flexible. But quickly I moved from the mailroom to the financial office. I remember my first controller, Igor Nesterczuk. He was the first controller I worked with at the controller's office. The work was interesting. As a part of my University studying, I was writing a thesis about American personal income system. So reading and getting materials was easy because I was running the payroll; at that time it was all individually run by each USAID mission for the American staff and personal service contractors.

Q: When you were at the Higher School, you were studying finance and accounting as well as economics, is that right?

YASHKOV: Yes. All the elements, including finance and accounting, yes. It was a two years full-time studying program.

Q: It was almost like an MBA, a masters in business administration program?

YASHKOV: The degree's was a Master of Arts in economics. That's the first time Russia recognized or switched to the system of bachelor's and master's degrees. My graduation paperwork says MA (masters of art) in economics.

Q: So you were in the first graduating class of the Higher School?

YASHKOV: Yes. That was quite interesting. Now I feel – I'm proud, I'm glad the school succeeded and has a very good reputation.

Q: Yes. That's very interesting. Sorry I distracted you from discussion of going into the finance office at USAID.

YASHKOV: It was part of the story! I just kept moving up in the finance office. Again it was in the second year, I got the position of financial analyst that was one of the positions within the finance office.

Q: Can I go backwards for one second? Once you went for that first interview and learned what USAID was, did you have any hesitation at all in going to work for the U.S. government? Or is that something that in those days you would not have been that concerned about?

YASHKOV: Absolutely not. I had no hesitation. I was looking at it as working for any foreign company. I didn't, honestly speaking, care at all. It was just like any other job would be. It just happened to be that I kept staying on this path, working for USAID, for almost 12 years with no hesitation. I know that relationships between countries have bumps, but it was a job.

Q: I was just curious at that point in time how it was viewed. I can understand – it was just viewed as a job. You moved then into financial analyst positions. What did that entail? Was that the internal audit function that later evolved, or were you doing other work?

YASHKOV: The very first assignment I had on this position was not related to USAID at all. There was a food-monitoring program for the department of Agriculture and they needed support, to have someone with Russian and English language to accompany inspectors from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. There was a huge program of exporting wheat and other seeds (corn, peas) to Russia. It was the mid-'90s when Russia needed to import those basic food commodities.

Q: Did that work involve traveling out to monitor food distribution?

YASHKOV: Yes. We went to several different cities in western Siberia, Ural Mountains, and villages around St. Petersburg - places where the recipients of the products were. It was interesting, very educational for me. I've always lived in large cities, so I have no idea how things are grown and what's behind the whole process, so it was educational for me – I learned some things about agriculture. That was interesting. Then coming back to USAID, there were several major tasks in this position, financial analyst; supporting contracting office by evaluating financial capacity of potential recipients; working on supporting awards from USAID to Russian recipients directly.

Q: When did that begin, that you began to do that kind of work, including the pre-award surveys? Would that have been around 1996?

YASHKOV: Yes, 1996 or '97.

Q: So you began to look at the various Russian organizations AID (USAID) was working with?

YASHKOV: And American ones that operated in Russia.

Q: Do you recall some of the organizations you were looking at?

YASHKOV: Junior Achievement, Institute for Urban Economics, etc.

Q: You must have learned a lot in doing those initial analyses of those organizations, about different kinds of strengths and weaknesses. Were there any lessons from that that remain with you?

YASHKOV: Yes. My approach is to look at how the organizations are utilizing the assistance. They had kept accounting and financial records in certain ways, using strict and rigid systems from the Soviet Union. There were certain things that needed to be explained to everyone, both the recipients and the donors. The donor – USAID – has, for example, auditors coming from the inspector-general. I accompanied quite a number of auditors visiting these different organizations in Russia. It was a process of explaining how systems work in Russia. Russia has an established system; it was not necessarily fully compatible with the expectations of the West-based auditors on certain things, but it was a very strong system by itself.

Q: Did they understand that? Were you able to convince them that different systems can provide sufficient protections?

YASHKOV: I believe so, yes. We found substitutes for some things asked by the auditors from the States. I would show them a substitute for something they were looking at in a different form. I was quite fortunate to work with experienced people who would look at the systems in different countries; they understood that systems would be different but it didn't mean that the system was not adequate to the requirement and for keeping records in proper order. There were certain things for the Russian organizations; it was not easy for them to be compliant or to satisfy both the Russian and American side. Something that was easy in the States, in Russia it would be difficult to get into the system, and vice-versa. There were some incompatibilities, but everything seemed to work in the general area of financial reporting. For me it was interesting learning about the programs. I found them interesting to see what kind of support was covered by...

Q: By the USAID grants? I should say for the record here that we worked together for four years in 1999 to 2003, and I know that you really took a strong interest in many of the programs that you were introduced to in your financial work, including I know one grantee that I'd be interested in your thoughts about, and that was Junior Achievement Russia. I know that you looked at them through your financial management lens, but you were also quite interested in the work that they did.

YASHKOV: Yes, yes. I was participating in their activities, and I was a judge for several competitions with my colleagues from the financial office. I was very impressed with what our children could do at their age, what kind of ideas they have, supported by this

program. That was quite impressive. There were many enthusiastic people working for the program who were putting their energy and hearts into this program.

Q: Going back to the controller's office, financial management office. You were part of a unit of financial analysts. Maybe you can tell us a little bit about that unit, how many of you there were and how you got started, and the role you played. It was quite unique to USAID Russia to have that function as developed as it was in the controller's office, and I think it would be interesting to learn more about that.

YASHKOV: It was unique unit, because I haven't seen it in other missions as an established unit. There were four of us working for the unit. We always worked in pairs, so we could have four eyes looking at the same organization, so we could have an objective unbiased opinion and a better understanding of what we were seeing. I had three colleagues; they were all very different in the way they worked. All were good professionals. It was very nice working with them. We traveled a lot in Russia; the programs were all the way to the Russian Far East, so it's over a nine-hour flight to the other side of Russia. I was very happy working with them.

Q: How was that unit developed? Was there any special training to meld you into a unit?

YASHKOV: What happened – it was like creating a building from within. It's not like it was an order to establish the unit; it was happening while I was working in the financial office where the group was defined as a financial analysts unit.

Q: So it just kind of evolved?

YASHKOV: Yes. I don't think there was a specific moment. This unit is an independent unit doing financial work for the mission, supporting other offices and the financial office itself. It was working under the financial office umbrella, working for different departments within the mission.

Q: Did Cliff Bennett – was he attached to that unit or was he playing a more general role in the controller's office?

YASHKOV: He was more with the financial analyst/internal audit unit I would say. He was mostly with our team. He had a lot of experience, and he has a good way of expressing himself and his thoughts he was sharing with us were very clear. We learned a lot from him.

Q: He was a former auditor; is that correct?

YASHKOV: He was, yes.

Q: Did he do training for you all, or was it more just working with you?

YASHKOV: It was so called on-the-job training. There was an auditor who actually came to give us training.

Q: But you did have some formal training as well that helped you with things to look for? That was...

YASHKOV: We've been trained in the finance and procurement rules and regulations. We've had the systems set up to standardize our approach in the way we do our audits and reviews. It was more putting things together and having everything done in an organized way.

Q: Changing tack a little bit. During that early period when you joined AID in 1994 – certainly in the first four or five years you were there, much of the focus of the AID program was on economic reform and working with the Russian government. I'm just curious since you had been at the Higher School of Economics and knew many of the economic reformers who led that process on the Russian side, just curious whether sitting in the AID mission, you felt involved in that process? Or was it really just something that other people were doing and you were not particularly involved?

YASHKOV: Me personally?

Q: Even just your awareness of what was going on. Did you have any views in how it was being done? Just curious, since you had been working with some of the reformers when you were studying.

YASHKOV: I would say I was not much involved in the implementation part. I was getting some information but because the job itself required particular attention to the bureaucratic part of the programs. I knew from the project descriptions what these programs were about. Our unit's involvement was related to the compliance part of the projects execution.

Q: You know, those early days the diversity of the USAID staff – there were direct-hire Americans, there were others who came in as personal services contractors and others, many of whom had more specific knowledge of Russia including Russian language skills; and then you had the Russian staff itself. Talk a little bit about how in those early days people came together to work as one mission, and give a bit of flavor about how it all came together? You had people with very diverse backgrounds.

YASHKOV: The FSN (Foreign Service national) staff – the local staff would have very different stories how they came to the mission. I don't even know how most of them got to have their jobs with the mission. By looking at the educational background, all the local staff were well educated with higher education; some worked with ministries, like the ministry of Health for example, or had connections with others that would make them very knowledgeable in the field. That's the local staff. For personal services contractors, because of the nature of the arrangements they were experts in their particular fields. For direct hires, U.S. government career employees, had different backgrounds, with different

regions – working in Russia, for some of them it was easy. For some people they had some struggle. It's really understandable because it's very personalized, how people see different environments. Some would prefer something different. Russia is kind of unique place. It's not a third world developing country; it has well educated people. They might not be easily understandable by the West, but there were systems established in the country, so it was not something building from scratch.

Q: Did most of the Americans who came understand that? Or did it take some of them a while?

YASHKOV: I would say among the diplomatic personnel, they mostly understood where they were or they learned that within the first few months of being in country. Again, for different people the environment, the way they saw the environment was different. Some people really liked it; some people didn't. The environment I would say in a broad view – even the weather can affect people. Just living conditions, long commutes in Moscow – that was not easy for American staff and people who did not live close to the offices and had to commute.

Q: Thank you. USAID was within the embassy compound, so you probably had contact with FSNs working for other agencies as well. I was just curious how you saw USAID within the broader embassy community and the interaction among FSNs, and the general feeling as a USAID employee how you fit into that broader community?

YASHKOV: We had very little, almost no interaction with non-USAID staff; I'm talking about FSNs. We were in a separate building; there was no need for us to go to another building. I personally hadn't any communication with anyone at the embassy, non-USAID FSN staff. We were kind of by ourselves. Most of our systems were independent. Accounting, financial stuff was all independent. There were certain expenses that were handled by the Department of State. But generally - no interaction.

Q: From the financial management side there would have been less; some of the other offices might have had more communication.

YASHKOV: Exactly. But in an office that works in economic development, probably they had more interaction with embassy.

Q: Let me ask a question about the degree to which as an FSN you were given opportunities for training by USAID, either formal or informal training, and also the degree to which you had any mentors that you think helped you advance professionally, and the degree to which in general you think there is mentoring for FSNs, either by other FSNs or by American staff?

YASHKOV: Especially at the beginning of USAID in Russia in the '90s, there were a number of different trainings. There was quite a good program of sharing knowledge and teaching how USAID operates. In the '90s there was good support. Then it started getting a little bit more difficult to get refresher training. That was because of the budgeting

constraints, which made it a little bit difficult to get training for USAID/ Russia staff. Luckily we had knowledgeable chiefs of the finance office. Personally I think I've been very lucky with my colleagues and who I worked with. Very nice experience!

Q: That's good!

YASHKOV: But again, that's my personal experience! I wouldn't call myself over optimistic, but I don't know – that's how I personally feel about working with USAID.

Q: On Russia more generally, the effectiveness of the FSN personnel system, whether there were issues that you think could have been better handled vis-à-vis professional opportunities for the Russian staff in USAID – any thoughts on that or things that could have been done better?

YASHKOV: Generally I would say our personnel work for USAID, and that applies not only to Russia - it's a very unique environment. Going from this environment to work somewhere else is a huge change. Basically, personnel who started working for USAID and the U.S. government at some point when trying to leave, will face many challenges in adopting to another environment. Some people didn't realize what it would be like to be in the system and how difficult it would be to do something else. Looking into the future – I'm not talking about Russia, just generally – to get some idea of how to help people to find a job other than USAID itself. It's not a U.S. government career job for FSNs. I understand that some of them, in places like in Jordan, work for several decades and they do retire from that system. But that's probably the reason because they cannot work anywhere else.

Q: That's an interesting point about the degree to which it's a career or just part of a career.

YASHKOV: It's very difficult to change career to something else, while spending a number of years working for that organization. I'm not saying it's bad to work for the same organization; it's just something that people need to keep in mind.

Q: Do you think that sometimes having worked for USAID or the U.S. government that some potential opportunities may open but other opportunities may close because one has worked for USAID. Is that the case you think?

YASHKOV: Yes. It's not even related to the fact of working for a diplomatic mission. It's not related to the relationship between the countries. It's just a different environment. The way the systems work within that environment; in many cases they are so different that switching to another environment is very difficult or even impossible.

Q: I think that's probably true for anyone who works for the government – private sector employers would look with some suspicion at any of us who worked for the public sector! That's a good point.

YASHKOV: But if they have another layer, not just private sector vs. government, but it's a foreign government too, for FSNs. It's just another layer that adds to this, I won't say 'suspicion' but something that is seen as difficult or a different environment.

Q: I have heard that some of the FSNs in Russia did – related to that point – were under pressure sometimes from sources within the country. Did you ever encounter that? Or were you left alone?

YASHKOV: As far as I know, everybody has had that at least in one occasion. I look at it from a rational point – people do their job. That's what they are supposed to do, right? People who work as FSNs for a foreign government should probably expect to be questioned by the host government. They wanted to ask me questions because it's their job to ask.

Q: (Laughter) That's fair! OK.

YASHKOV: I don't see it as something that would upset me. It's just, "Well, everybody does it." It's not unique for any particular country. I have had a similar experience in Jordan with Jordanian authorities; it was all friendly I would say and understandable – that is the way I see it.

Q: Actually, since I would agree it is a universal issue that FSNs around the world face. Do you think USAID does enough to help its local employees deal with that issue or prepare themselves for it? Are the Americans sensitive enough to it?

YASHKOV: I would say if a person feels he is doing something wrong probably he should find another job. I never felt it; I felt like I was just doing my job. It doesn't involve any activity that would harm anyone, so I was open to any discussion with anyone. I didn't feel that I was doing anything wrong for either side, (that is if looking at this as "opposing sides"). To get prepared for something, just be yourself and don't panic. When there are no surprises, it's not a big deal. That probably should be the message to people so they know that somebody might be interested in something. Again, that's their job.

Q: That's very helpful observation. Is there anything else related to your work in Russia you wanted to mention before we move on? Any thoughts you have about the USAID program or the role of FSNs in the mission, other thoughts related to the role of financial analysts? Anything related to your time in Russia you'd like to mention?

YASHKOV: The idea of the financial analyst unit as an independent unit was a great idea and worked well for the mission. I'm glad that the American personnel trusted us in what we were doing. Again, different missions work in different environments and have staff with different levels of knowledge and education. Eastern Europe countries, the local personnel are very well educated; they have an amazing knowledge already so it's not something about teaching the basics. I would say the same about Jordan; Jordan has

amazing local personnel and Jordanians are very well educated. Countries are very different. AID was a totally different environment in South Sudan –

Q: Before we go on to that, let me ask one more question about the financial analyst unit. You played somewhat of an internal audit function; you did pre-award surveys, you looked at capacity. But you also helped those organizations strengthen their own financial and management systems; is that correct?

YASHKOV: Correct. I wouldn't say "strengthen their financial systems"; I would say "making their financial systems more compatible with the donor requirements." The financial systems were in place, but were just not in line with the requirement of the donor. That required quite a lot of training and discussion with the financial personnel of these organizations, and teaching them how to present their data and financial system in the manner that was compatible with USAID requirements. It was not building financial capacity but making them compatible.

Q: That's good. You left Moscow to go to Iraq; is that correct?

USAID/Iraq – Third Country National Contract as Deputy Controller

YASHKOV: It was 2004 when I left for Iraq, January 2004. In December 2003 Jim Redder, the USAID/Russia Controller, worked in Moscow and went to work in Iraq. He asked me if I was interested in applying for a position of deputy controller/financial analyst, working for USAID/Iraq. I thought "That would be a good opportunity for me to work in some place other than Russia." When working in Russian mission we were also supporting missions in Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia so I've been to Armenia and Ukraine, working with their missions and their staff, but based in Moscow. I saw Iraq as an opportunity to do something in a totally different place. I thought why not? I went to Iraq. That was a different environment for sure!

Q: I'm trying to remember how long USAID had been in Iraq by that time? Was it a year or two?

YASHKOV: I think the first year was 2003; 2004 was the second year for the mission. It was in 2003 when the post-war assistance programs were brought to Iraq.

Q: So you went to Baghdad to the Green Zone?

YASHKOV: Yes, the Green Zone. There was no embassy building, personnel were located in the palace and other buildings on the territory of the zone. There was no proper housing – the housing was just containers. It was actually not so bad. I need my space so I needed something for myself; I would have a hard time-sharing a house. I had colleagues from Egypt, Philippines, and Jordan. They lived in a house, but I had my own container; that was better for me.

Q: You went into the controller's office. Jim Redder was the controller?

YASHKOV: Yes. What happened, when I got in he got out. He was waiting for a break and left. I was there without him for the first short period.

Q: How big was the office? How many people were there? Americans and FSNs from around the world?

YASHKOV: There were a couple of American contracting officers. The financial office was five.

Q: In the controller's office?

YASHKOV: Yes.

Q: And how many Americans were there?

YASHKOV: For the financial office there was just Jim Redder. I don't really remember the total number working for the mission. The reason I can't state a number is because it was a mix of USAID people, Army Corps of Engineers were working there in the same office. And people from the Inspector General unit – we were all in the same offices, the same building. I can't really remember who was from where.

Q: Okay. I see. The USAID operation was very dependent on the FSNs from around the world who volunteered to come in and work.

YASHKOV: Right. The reason for that was the mission needed someone who would come and start working without having to learn the basics like how to do this or how to do that. They wanted people who could come and start doing the job right away.

Q: What were you doing specifically as a financial analyst there?

YASHKOV: It was a broader function than financial analyst. It was more like a deputy controller function would be. There was a role in budgeting because there was the monthly budgeting. There were a number of logistics that needed to be set-up, such as banking. Due to the security situation, as well as the nature of the programs and the implementing organizations/companies, the function of the financial analysts were quite different from what they would be in Russia.

Q: So you were playing a very broad role and having to work with other agencies, is that right?

YASHKOV: Right. They were right there and we were very much involved in their operations including financially.

Q: Financial oversight? Wow, it sounds like it was very complex and difficult.

YASHKOV: Yes. There was a lot of money involved. Considering the security constraints, it was quite a challenge.

Q: Did you spend all your time in the Green Zone, or did you get out at all?

YASHKOV: I didn't get out at all, because of security constraints. There were some technical staff, there was a time where they could go out. But again it was very difficult to organize going out and expensive. There were a lot of limits on the way we operated.

Q: Were you involved with financial management? I remember reading or hearing about the military having special funds they were using for small grants – were you involved with helping them oversee any of that?

YASHKOV: I was not involved in overseeing grants activities. Though the military's presence and involvement was noticeable.

Q: During this period, were there security issues within the Green Zone as well?

YASHKOV: Mortars were flying into the Green Zone. It was quite unpredictable. They were hitting houses or landing near houses. I believe in my time none of the USAID staff were injured. But I believe later something happened that affected USAID staff as well.

Q: Did you feel USAID was doing a good job trying to make things as comfortable and secure as possible for you all?

YASHKOV: I think we had a pretty good arrangement. The only thing that could be done in the future is considering the time difference between the States and the mission – sometimes the meetings were very late because Washington was having meetings in their afternoon. They could be more considerate for the environment not to expect people to work 24/7. Even in this environment, people need time for themselves.

Q: Right. You mentioned Jim Redder left shortly after you arrived?

YASHKOV: He left for vacation.

Q: Oh, for vacation! But he returned to post?

YASHKOV: Yes, he came back. For me what was difficult during his absence is that I had to take over the responsibilities and quickly figure out how things worked and what needed to be done.

Q: Were you left in charge?

YASHKOV: Partially I would say so, yes. I was going to all the meetings and getting things done as if I were the controller up to a point – as non-US citizen, I was not authorized to sign certain financial documents, but yes. That was a challenging time for

me because I was being like an acting controller and being in that environment, that was a challenge.

Q: That sounds very challenging! So this was still in the early days of USAID putting together its program, right? Some of the program was being done jointly with other agencies, some was more traditional USAID programming with contracts to do things – is that correct?

YASHKOV: It was a mix, with heavy involvement – the military had their say. There were many different parts involved in how things were done. All the approvals and agreements between different parties involved were quite difficult.

Q: Did you have to directly deal with the military yourself?

YASHKOV: Not really, other than there was some financial coordination with the Army Corps of Engineers. There was an indication of involvement of other than USAID parties. I'm not sure how it was formally arranged and who had the final say and who had more power. But at that time the military (it was my impression) had a lot of power and a final say on some things.

Q: Who was the mission director during that period? Was it Lew Lucke?

YASHKOV: No, I was there in a different time. It was mostly during a transitional period from one mission director to another.

Q: That's fine, just curious.

YASHKOV: Some things I just don't remember for some reason!

Q: Your own personal contact was primarily with USAID officers?

YASHKOV: Yes. With the contracting officers, and the financial office, with the mission director, IG Auditors. A lot with the contracting officer.

Q: You mentioned auditors. Was there a special audit office there in Iraq?

YASHKOV: I believe they were on assignments there, for three months or something. I think the office wasn't permanently established, but the IG personnel were there all the time.

Q: They were rotating through.

YASHKOV: I didn't spend a lot of time in that office. I was there for just the first few months, and then I started working for USAID/Iraq but from Jordan.

Q: I was going to ask you then – they decided for security reasons to reduce the number of people in Baghdad?

YASHKOV: Yes, for security reasons some – while I was in Jordan on a break actually, they decided they would keep me there. There were many things done in Jordan as a support for USAID Iraq. There were some operations related to finances done by Cairo, but then everything shifted to Jordan.

Q: So some of the financial management functions?

YASHKOV: Yes. It was a good time to consolidate everything in Jordan.

Q: Did the controller position for Iraq also move to Jordan?

YASHKOV: It stayed in Baghdad. In Jordan, it was me for that year. Then after I left, it expanded I think slightly. There were several working in Jordan for USAID Iraq.

Q: You were part of USAID Iraq, but based in Jordan. From that base, did you go back into Baghdad at all? Or did you do all your work from Jordan?

YASHKOV: I did everything from Jordan. The Jordanians were very supportive and the personnel there, there were certain parts of the job that had to be done by Jordan mission personnel. It worked very well.

Q: Can you describe what functions you played while based in Jordan? What you did on a daily basis, what kinds of functions you were able to perform from afar?

YASHKOV: They were many contractors' administration offices in Amman, so coordination between the implementers and USAID on the financial side for these contractors, when they required an interaction. So I was involved in this. General support, like having money transferred to the office; setting up bank account for USAID Iraq in Jordan, I also did that. Again payroll was done in Jordan. Basic interaction with contractors, also, including some billings review.

Q: It sounds like most of the financial management was done out of Amman.

YASHKOV: I think after I left it got more to Amman than they had in Iraq. But still Iraq had the controller and I think it started shifting back to Iraq; eventually the office in Jordan was closed.

Q: I vaguely recall – did you face some kind of issue in Jordan because you were Russian?

YASHKOV: There was an issue in Jordan; it was sudden and unexpected. I believe some of the diplomatic security officers decided I could not work for the U.S. embassy in Jordan for whatever reasons. I don't know what the issues were with the nationality.

Basically, the result of this, I had to leave this job and go back to Iraq or to Moscow, and I chose to go back to Moscow. Personally I think it was a little bit strange considering that the security clearance that's supposed to be for our personnel, what's the difference between working in Iraq, Moscow, or Jordan? That was a little bit unexpected for me.

Q: This was because USAID Jordan office was in the embassy compound in Amman?

YASHKOV: Yes. Physically I was in the area of the library and going to USAID offices of the embassy. I don't see the difference between that embassy and the embassy in Moscow which has most restricted areas that are not accessible to local personnel.

Q: A case of security officers in different countries having different rules.

YASHKOV: Right. They have a power to do what they believe is right for security reasons, but USAID could not do anything about it. As a result of this I went back to Moscow and worked in the U.S. embassy in Moscow, with no problem.

USAID/Russia – Return to Financial Analyst Unit

Q: When you went back to Moscow, were you working on Iraq or back to USAID Moscow?

YASHKOV: It was USAID Moscow. The Iraq contract was a separate contract – I was working under a TCN contract. Some FSNs had temporary-duty like assignments, going there to work as TCNs but not having a separate from their home mission contract.

Q: OK – when you left Moscow to go to Iraq, did you go on a personal services contract?

YASHKOV: It was a Third Country National contract, totally separate from USAID Moscow. That has some advantages, but also some disadvantages. For example, because I didn't work for almost a year in Moscow, I lost my promotion and salary increase under my Moscow-based FSN contract, when I returned.

Q: When you went back to USAID Moscow, you were re-hired as an FSN?

YASHKOV: Right. It was a rehiring as if I hadn't worked for USAID at all! (Laughter) When I was leaving, there was an understanding that I was freezing my position – not completely terminating, but sort of terminating. They kept a place for me, which was nice. But at the same time, they stopped the time for working for that particular mission, so it was as if I did not work for USAID at all. But I still worked for USAID, only for a different mission – generally, the same organization.

Q: Right. So you returned to Moscow then in 2005? You left in 2004?

YASHKOV: I left in January 2004; in September 2004 I was back.

Q: So nine months later you returned to a financial analyst position in USAID Moscow?

YASHKOV: Yes.

Q: So you continued that work for...

YASHKOV: For exactly one year, until September 2005.

Resigns from USAID/Russia

YASHKOV: Then I decided to move to Jordan. It was just moving to Jordan; it was not moving with any particular contractor, or moving with a job. It was just moving. Which was –

Q: Very brave!

YASHKOV: Yes. I'm an adventurous person!

Q: From Jordan you did a number of consulting assignments?

Consulting Firm Positions

YASHKOV: Yes. Well, it started slow. Once I got to Jordan I went to the University of Jordan to study Arabic - spending time doing something useful. My first job was actually with Winrock in South Sudan; a short-term consulting assignment. It was again very different environment. It was in 2006 in February. That was the first time I did consulting.

Q: When you were doing consulting, it was doing financial analyst type work?

YASHKOV: That particular one was providing training in budgeting for government officials of South Sudan. Public finance budgeting basics. Very basic. But it was for the South Sudanese - doing different exercises, describing different approaches and models. I mentioned the environment; the education level was very different even within the group.

Q: Right; South Sudan was a brand-new country at that point, correct?

YASHKOV: It was not independent; at that time they were part of Sudan.

Q: It hadn't yet become independent. So during that period, you did consulting with a number of different consulting firms?

YASHKOV: That was the consulting. Then there was another job, then I started working for AED - the Academy for Educational Development. I did an audit of this organization at the request of USAID Jordan.

Q: In Jordan?

YASHKOV: Yes. Basically the arrangement was, at the request of USAID Jordan, they requested AED to get audited, and I was the auditor of a particular case with AED, which was running an educational program. It was originally for two weeks, and turned into three months and I ended up working for AED as an advisor/consultant for almost two and a half years.

Q: In that capacity you worked in various countries?

YASHKOV: It led to the position being director of grants and operations. It became more than just finance; it was more projects administering.

Q: Let me just ask, was it an interesting experience to move from having done these functions at USAID to be working with a contractor? What kinds of differences did you see? Did you have any impressions of changes and things you wished you'd known when you were at the USAID side or vice-versa, things you were able to bring from the USAID perspective to an implementing partner?

YASHKOV: I would say generally USAID and implementing partners are two different worlds. They behave totally different. It's a lot more challenging to work for implementing partners. USAID was structured, not many changes, no surprises basically. When you work for the implementing partner, when the program starts you're building a program from scratch – organizing things. Usually, within USAID, their functions are well defined between personnel. You stay within your niche. While working for an implementing partner you have to be able to do many things, in different functions. Especially with the set-up and start-up of the program, when things are just being figured out by the organization.

Q: Do you think people in USAID understand that complexity and how difficult it is for the implementing partners? Or is there more AID could try to do through its own designs to take account of that complexity?

YASHKOV: USAID is mostly not involved in the project administration other than the technical parts. Things like finance, human resources happen in the background, not much on the surface for USAID, so they don't see this parts of the implementation that actually require a lot of effort from the implementing partners. Does USAID understand this? I think it does, but there are certain things I would say that could be more thought-through. At the beginning there should be a clear understanding what the implementing partners will be asked for, like in terms of reporting and data. Because sometimes expectations are different and there would be "surprises". Somehow the way the agreements are seen by the organization, are different from the way they are interpreted by USAID. But there was understanding that USAID itself sometimes is asked for something that pops up unexpectedly.

Q: Do you think USAID understands the complexity of start-up> Or even within the implementing partners, something I've often heard is that the proposals are done by one group of people and then the program management people go in to make it real, and that often even the proposal done by the proposal writers doesn't recognize the complexity of the start-up and that the time frame is often longer than what is in the proposal. Did you see that kind of issue?

YASHKOV: I see this quite a lot actually from the implementing partners – how things are planned or envisioned, what's going to happen in the future. For example, we need to hire more staff than was originally planned because of program changes. We need to rearrange how people are allocated, where they are. I've seen many times things change in the way the program goes. Nothing unusual or should not happen, because of the program expansion or budget changes. But, a lot of resources are being used to set up this new arrangement.

Q: It's interesting for AID people to have experience with implementing partners and gain that different perspective. I'm wondering if you were back working with USAID, if you would have any differences in how you do your job?

YASHKOV: In my experience working with implementing partners as a USAID employee – audits and financial reviews – I already knew what they were facing when they were working with USAID funds. I knew this even when I was working for USAID. However, when I started working for the implementers, I didn't know I would have to be building from zero for each of the programs. That was different. USAID is more structured environment.

Q: This is Carol Peasley; this is the second session with Vlad Yashkov. We were in the midst of talking about his consulting work after leaving USAID in 2004. We're probably around 2006. Vlad, if I could ask you to carry on with the consulting assignments you had. I believe some of them became longer-term assignments as well.

YASHKOV: Yes. So the first job that turned from short-term consulting to fulltime was with the Academy for Educational Development, which had a program in Jordan in 2006-09. It was a very interesting program supporting schools. That project was for educational development – it involved a lot of construction.

Q: Your specific task was project management?

YASHKOV: I was general oversight of the project administration – compliance with USAID regulations, ensuring supporting documents in place, working with different departments such as contracting and finance and human resources, general oversight of their work. I stayed with this project till the end of the project. Then I worked on the closeout of the project. While I was in this post-project closeout phase, I got a proposal to work for Winrock International in South Sudan.

Q: Vlad, before we go to the southern Sudan work – on the compliance questions and

closeout, were most of those fairly routine? Or were there any special issues you had to work on, things in the Jordan environment that made it more challenging? Or was it pretty straightforward and relatively easy to ensure compliance?

Q: That there had been fraud or something?

YASHKOV: Yes. There were allegations of fraud that I confirmed during my initial audit of AID and that's how it turned into a more in-depth audit of the program. I was team leader for the auditors that were hired to do their detailed audits.

Q: After that audit when the fraud was confirmed, then they increased the number of staff working on compliance and control issues, I guess.

YASHKOV: There was a rearrangement. Basically, getting things more organized in terms of work distribution within the project. The issue was mostly related to the segregation of duties, and that was resolved then.

Q: Thank you, I was just curious how that was all handled. So then you went to work on southern Sudan?

YASHKOV: Yes. I worked there for 15 months with another USAID-funded project.

Q: You were physically in southern Sudan?

YASHKOV: Yes, I was based in Juba.

Q: This was starting in 2009?

YASHKOV: Yes, 2009.

Q: What kind of program was it?

YASHKOV: It was a multi-component program – water sanitation, education, and local governance. The multiple components worked in different regions of southern Sudan. It was quite a complex program for administration.

Q: Your responsibilities under this program were again administrative controls, project management?

YASHKOV: Yes. I was director of finance and operations, with emphasis on the finance.

Q: How many people worked under the contractor cooperative agreement? Were there Americans, third country nationals, and Sudanese?

YASHKOV: It was in several regions, about 100 locally hired people. That was a large number of people.

Q: Was there American staff as well?

YASHKOV: Yes, about 25 or 30, including staff in the regions and consultants.

Q: Wow, very large contract. But you were based in Juba, but there were team members based in other parts of the country.

YASHKOV: Right. There were subdivisions, for example for the finance personnel in different parts of the country.

Q: Were you able to travel to the project sites?

YASHKOV: Yes, I did travel to the sites, to see how things worked in the satellite offices.

Q: This was before independence, right? Still part of Sudan at that point?

YASHKOV: Yes. I've never been to the northern part. The southern part had their own visa system, labor code, legislation – it was a mix of something from the central government and for South Sudan local government. It was quite challenging; sometimes there were contradictions between the new and the “old” systems.

Q: I assume it was a very challenging environment in which to work. Were there special issues that made it seem unique or more complex than other places you have worked?

YASHKOV: In general it was not an easy environment. Health, such as Malaria was a big issue – I got it three times while I was there. Issues with clean water and housing.

Q: A little like Iraq in that sense?

YASHKOV: It was a little bit different from Iraq, where the security was the prime topic in making arrangements.

Q: Had USAID opened its office in Juba? Or were they still running things out of Kenya?

YASHKOV: There was an office in Juba. The staff was not like a separate from Khartoum mission; there was a representative for the mission director that was running that part of U.S. arrangements in Sudan. It looked quite independent though. As for logistics, many things were coming from Nairobi. Winrock would have a support office in Nairobi, and many companies have this or similar arrangement. For us, as an implementer, there was no connection with the systems in the northern part of Sudan.

Q: Were relations good with the USAID office in Juba?

YASHKOV: Yes, USAID was very supportive, addressing all of our needs in a very effective manner.

Q: As a finance director for the program, would your contact with USAID have been primarily with USAID finance people? Or would you have had contact also with the technical staff and the program managers?

YASHKOV: I would say for this program, as well as for other implementers I worked for, there's not much interaction between the finance office in the field and USAID of that country. Usually everything comes through the home office in the States. There was not much interaction between the finance offices in a particular country. As a matter of fact, I had none in Sudan.

Q: Did USAID do any audits of the program while you were there?

YASHKOV: Not while I was there. I believe the compulsory audits happen in the home offices. While I was there, there were no audits in the field.

Q: OK. I was just curious how all that worked from the field perspective.

YASHKOV: For example, in Russia I would be the one going to the local offices to do financial reviews. In South Sudan we didn't have it, didn't have anyone from the financial office from USAID while I was there. There were visitors in Iraq (different program).

Q: There wasn't much financial management contact. We had spoken earlier and you had talked about some of the complexity of program start-up always being a bit more difficult than what might have been anticipated when the project was designed and the initial contract signed. Were you at the start-up this Winrock project, or did you come in mid-term? Were there any special issues associated with management, either start-up or regular?

YASHKOV: I came not for the start-up, but just a little bit later. But, some changes still needed to be made to organize different parts of that program administration, such as hiring more staff to support financial office, procurement, and human resources.

Q: Was it easy to make the adjustments that were identified as being needed? Or did it take time to negotiate with USAID, or was it relatively straightforward?

YASHKOV: As per the type of that particular agreement, USAID had no part in it. For the administrative parts, it's all about how the implementer organizes it. USAID does not really dictate, it doesn't take any part in these arrangements. It does not affect the program. However, it can be quite different with a different type of agreement with USAID.

Q: So you were able to expand the number of people working on administrative questions on your own authorities?

YASHJOV: Yes; there's no interaction with USAID for that.

Q: Was this a cooperative agreement or contract; what type of mechanism was it?

YASHKOV: It was a cooperative agreement.

Q: Other observations about working in southern Sudan and things that you think would have made it easier to work, or might have helped make things more effective?

YASHKOV: Particularly in southern Sudan, USAID was really supportive and everything we were asking, we got support from USAID. There were no surprises from us and I think from administration side USAID was very responsive when we would have questions in contracting. From my observation of how rules and regulations are interpreted, each mission has its own set of mission orders, regulating certain aspects of its operations in a particular country/environment. It's not like they completely change them, but there are always small differences in the way things are interpreted.

Q: Was there a contracting officer at post? Or was it someone visiting from the regional office in Nairobi?

YASHKOV: I think the contracting officer was in the Sudan mission in the north. But I can't be sure 100%. I don't think there was anything in Nairobi that I remember for USAID.

Q: Let me ask – you mentioned the housing situation was difficult. Was each implementing partner or contractor – did you all manage your own housing situations? Or did USAID do something for the collective whole of implementing partners? Were you all on your own doing it? Was there a lot of variation in how people lived?

YASHKOV: I don't think USAID got involved in that, in southern Sudan. The same in Iraq – there was not much involvement, or none. That's basically up to the implementing organizations. Security, convenience for the project – for example, if you work for a ministry it's a good idea not to be too far from the place. The implementer did it all. I don't think USAID had any involvement.

Q: Did you know staff for other implementing partners? Did you live in similar circumstances? Or were there differences?

YASHKOV: I think it was pretty much the same. I don't think there was a huge difference between different compounds. There were basic compounds and nicer compounds and some very nice, but remote ones that wouldn't be convenient to stay in for practical reasons of communication.

Q: You were in a compound that was managed by Winrock? All Winrock employees living there?

YASHKOV: It was just Winrock, yes. It was a fenced place. Considering the environment, it was not too bad and appropriate, considering the place of the project.

Q: Were you restricted in your social life? Was most of it spent in the compound? Or was there much interaction with the different implementing partners and USAID staff?

YASHKOV: At that time when I was there, the security situation was OK so it was not so bad that they would need to hold us at the compound. We could go out to different places, meet people outside the compound. It was flexible, so we could socialize and meet people.

Q: Were the Sudanese who worked on the contract all southern Sudanese?

YASHKOV: Some were from neighboring countries, or Sudanese refugees who ran from the war some time ago. They went to Uganda or Kenya then came back. We had some Sudanese on the staff who actually came from the States. These people were very passionate about their country; they came with a vision to re-build it. It was good to see that these people who came from Sudan and became U.S. citizens but came back as repatriates.

Q: That reminds me, there were Sudanese from other countries coming back. The ones from the U.S. were American citizens and would have been treated as American citizens I would assume. But the others probably did not have the citizenship of whatever country they moved to. One of the issues I know that many implementing partners deal with is the local salary scale, where they're trying to manage salary levels and to be attractive enough to attract people to come and work, but also trying to keep the salary scale as appropriate as possible, given local levels. Were you involved as director of finance in any of those discussions; were there any issues you had to face in determining salary levels?

YASHKOV: For local staff salaries, how to get people hired – it's always been an issue. How to look at this salary history – salary history is a very interesting thing. In many places you can't look at salary history and apply a standard American approach, like you add five or 10 percent on top of it and you will have someone hired. The salary history does not represent the environment. It doesn't really work this way. Even going back to USAID Russia. For example, beginning of the '90s if you had a salary of like \$20 a month, that was a good salary. (Laughter) The salary – the way it was looked at USAID, what was the cost of living, what was inflation – it was like 100,000% and the salary in dollars was jumping up several times. Double, quadruple, ten times more than it was at the beginning of '90s. We do look at the general environment – there are ways of justifying the salaries for the local staff, regardless of what they were getting before.

Q: Was there competition among the implementing partners to get good people? Did some of the local staff go from one contractor to another, or one implementing partner to another?

YASHKOV: I've seen it; we call it poaching right? Trying to get a person working for another project. There is a general understanding that there is a limit of how far can you go doing it, but it happens anyway.

Q: It really wasn't an issue there. I was just curious; I'm sure local hired staff was in high demand and I wondered if there was competition in southern Sudan to get the best people.

YASHKOV: With the local staff in Sudan it was really difficult to find someone who was qualified for a job right away. There was a lot of training involved. You'd hire someone who doesn't know anything at all and then just train the personnel.

Q: An important part of your job then was doing the training of some of the locally hired staff?

YASHKOV: There was a lot of training. My position was envisioned or planned as someone who would train a local person. It was difficult to find someone with even sufficient basic education; that was – most of the educated staff were coming from Uganda or Kenya. That would be the most qualified local staff.

Q: I see. Because they had had education and the truly local local staff probably had not had as many opportunities.

YASHKOV: Right, right. They were all Sudanese but Sudanese who had spent time in other countries had more opportunities to study, and wanted to study. I remember people from the first training I did in 2006; they were really very much interested in learning and getting more knowledge and having an education. That was important for them and it was very good to see people understand the importance of education.

Q: You were talking earlier about making adjustments to the cooperative agreement over time to add people, to change structures. Was some of that because of the recognition that more time needed to be devoted to training?

YASHKOV: Not related to training. It was just the program was expanding and needed more human resources to do the work.

Q: The cooperative agreements or contracts were written in a way that allowed the partner to do the training it needed to do to get its staff up to speed.

YASHKOV: I've seen agreements that explicitly mention staff development. Also, there are many that would not have that part predefined in the agreement. Usually, in the contract it is more defined, but in the core of the agreement there are certain flexibilities

for these changes that come along the way. In my opinion they could be related to changing the program itself.

Q: I was wondering when AID is moving into new countries in post-conflict situation if it needs to take account of the skill base to make sure they're building enough training into the program?

YASHKOV: In South Sudan it was known that for the same job there the implementing partners needed more staff to have the job done while in some other places the way the staff worked it would be more effective and there wouldn't be need for that many people.

Q: Okay, good. It was well reflected in the programming that was done.

YASHKOV: Right, right. It was known; the environment was known to USAID.

Q: Okay. Any further thoughts on South Sudan before we move on? I gather you stayed there till June of 2010 and then moved on. Any further thoughts on South Sudan before moving to your next bit of work?

YASHKOV: I believe USAID was doing whatever could be done considering the environment and the changing environment, new country and society itself – it's very unique and challenging environment, involving different interests, and things like tribal society.

Q: Now that you mention that, obviously in South Sudan today there are problems that relate to different ethnic groups. You had a large Winrock team; was that an issue at all about different ethnic backgrounds or problems that had to be managed?

YASHKOV: Within the staff we didn't have these problems. The staff were from different backgrounds. The different places where the program worked had to be taken into consideration, including changing security situations in the area. There were several evacuations from different locations because of this.

Q: Why don't we move on. In the summer of 2010 you returned to Amman, correct?

YASHKOV: Yes. It was a consulting job. While I was in my last month working in South Sudan, after I decided to go back to Amman, I got a call from the former IG who asked me if I was available to do some consulting work in Jordan. It was very good timing for me.

Q: What kind of consulting work did you do with them?

YASHKOV: It was a long-term consulting arrangement, but not a full-time job. It was almost a year working with for MCC (Millennium Challenge Corporation) project, working with Jordanian ministry of Water and Irrigation, establishing fiscal agency for MCC water project.

Q: Were there differences working on a contract funded through the Millennium Challenge Corporation versus USAID?

YASHKOV: No, it was quite similar I would say. It was much easier for me, because of the arrangement. I was the team leader and I was in full control of that contract implementation.

Q: The contract was to help build the fiscal agent for the entity that would be implementing the Millennium Challenge Corporation project?

YASHKOV: Yes. It was the third stage out of four so it was doing something that has had been going for a while. Steps were very explicit so it was following the steps that had been pre-built. It was not a very difficult task for me. The job was all completed, MCC was happy with the result.

Q: Good. So you did that for almost two years?

YASHKOV: For a year, but in two different years from July 2010 to 2011.

Q: Then you moved to another contract from that, correct?

YASHKOV: Yes. The next one was actually in Iraq.

Q: You went back to Iraq?

YASHKOV: It was for the implementing partners. It was working for Chemonics.

Q: That was for a Chemonics project in Iraq. Were you based in Iraq or Amman?

YASHKOV: I was based in Baghdad, yes.

Q: So you went back to Baghdad. It must have been quite different from when you had been there earlier.

YASHKOV: It was different. In a way it was quieter; it was safer than in 2004. But they were just using different tactics; there were no mortars flying in, which was good. The Green Zone was not accessible for private companies and organizations. It was all reserved for Iraqi government, for the diplomatic missions and ministries. There were no private companies in the Zone. Whoever worked there before, they all were moved out.

Q: Of the Green Zone. So you were in a compound, a Chemonics compound?

YASHKOV: It was actually a G4S (British security company) compound outside of the Green Zone; a completely different place. We were the largest G4S's tenant in that compound.

Q: There were other implementing partners as well?

YASHKOV: There was yes, but we were the main. Mostly it was G4S itself, this security company.

Q: Oh, that's the security company? They had a compound and Chemonics rented from them. What was the Chemonics project?

YASHKOV: It was governance-strengthening project (GSP). It was a contract.

Q: And you were the finance director?

YASHKOV: Yes, I was the director of finance.

Q: Did you have much contact with USAID during that period?

YASHKOV: No. Everything – the way it's done with a U.S. based company or organization, the administration and contracting part that involves interaction with USAID is done by the home office. The field offices rarely or never get involved.

Q: So you were preparing financial reports for headquarters who sent them to AID in Washington?

YASHKOV: Yes. That's how it's done.

Q: I know there was a special inspector-general's office in Iraq looking at programs. Did they happen to look at this program while you were there?

YASHKOV: While I was there? I don't remember them visiting, no.

Q: There were no special audits or anything you had to deal with?

YASHKOV: I'm pretty sure they did desk reviews, which can be done somewhere in Washington. But physically did they visit us in Iraq? I don't think so.

Q: How big was the finance team on the project for Chemonics?

YASHKOV: There were three people in Baghdad and also in Erbil we had a couple of staff. There was another field office, we were in three places.

Q: So they were doing work with regional governments?

YASHKOV: Right.

Q: And they were feeding financial information to you and then it was sent off to Washington.

YASHKOV: Right. The system with Chemonics, they used a live system where in the home office they could see everything instantly. It was all a combined system, which was very useful actually.

Q: Were there any special issues you had to deal with in Iraq, or any special observations about programming in that environment?

YASHKOV: Again, speaking as a project administrator, there were some issues in organizing banking, payments, and security restrictions.

Q: Was that particularly in the regions where you were working? Or was that a Baghdad problem as well?

YASHKOV: They all had their own problems. The regional centers and Baghdad was controlling certain things – banking. Sometimes things got stuck somewhere along the way to the regional offices.

Q: Were you dealing with Iraqi banks or were there international banks that were operating there?

YASHKOV: Iraqi banks. There were no international banks. There were banks that were international banks' affiliates, such as Bank of Baghdad would be somehow related to Citibank. But the relationship was just something that they have closer relations with Citibank, but it's an independent bank by itself. There was another bank close to HSBC (a British bank). For a very short period of time they even had a HSBC logo on their website but that went away very fast. All the businesses in that region – actually moving toward 2014, 2015, these businesses, each bank was planning to have something. HSBC sold all their business in Iraq. Banks in Iraq would all have some issues. For example, the Bank of Baghdad wouldn't have dollars, however, if dealing with local currency transfers, they would be a better choice than other banks.

Q: It was more complicated in South Sudan?

YASHKOV: Yes. A lot more complicated in South Sudan, starting from the sanctions the country was under at that time.

Q: I assume your staff in Iraq probably didn't need a lot of training?

YASHKOV: Exactly. The staff in Iraq have a proper education, suitable for the jobs. They come from their old system. They were all educated. As I remember, Baghdad University was one of the well-known high-ranked universities in the '80s and the best University to study in the Middle East.

Q: You did that for a year-plus.

YASHKOV: It was exactly a year.

Q: Then looking at your CV (curriculum vitae) you did some short-term consulting. Then in May of 2013 you started working with FHI 360 (a non-profit development organization), is that correct?

YASHKOV: Yes. It was again in Iraq, but in Erbil.

Q: Erbil – up in the north, right?

YASHKOV: Yes. Kurdistan.

Q: What was then – so you moved to Erbil?

YASHKOV: Yes.

Q: So what was the project? What was your job title and responsibility?

YASHKOV: The job title was a director of finance and grants, though there were not many grants – none actually while I was there. It was again mostly working with the financial office and human resources and procurement. It was very interesting program. The idea was to connect potential employers with job seekers through different means of technology such as SMS (short messaging system) or websites. It was quite a good idea. The environment in Erbil – again when I was there it was totally different. It was almost a normal place, like Amman in a way, with us being able to go out and go into stores, malls, movies. Totally different environment in comparison with – you can't even compare it with Baghdad; two different worlds.

Q: What were your living arrangements there? Were you just living like you would in Amman? Or were there compounds for implementing partners?

YASHKOV: We called it a compound but it was several buildings, next door to each other - they were large private houses or “villas”. I had a room in one of the houses and it was shared bathroom with the other rooms in the house.

Q: Those would have been other people working on the project, then?

YASHKOV: Yes. The villa sounds very pleasant, but it's just a two-story building with very basic rooms, nothing fancy.

Q: Were there a lot of implementing partners in Erbil?

YASHKOV: Yes. Different organizations. Not just USAID, but Europeans also, and a lot of private businesses were there with quite significant presence, I would say.

Q: Was there a large expatriate community there?

YASHKOV: Yes.

Q: Business and donor-funded activities?

YASHKOV: Yes.

Q: Did USAID have an office in Erbil, or were they doing this out of Baghdad?

YASHKOV: There was an office within the consulate, but most of interaction we had was with Baghdad. We had a project office in Baghdad, as well, so all interaction with USAID was through the office in Baghdad.

Q: Did this project operate only in Kurdistan?

YASHKOV: It was countrywide.

Q: Countrywide. So you worked on the Erbil, Kurdistan part.

YASHKOV: The centralized administration was done in Erbil for the whole project.

Q: OK. Again, I'm assuming that – were most of the staff Iraqi or Kurdish?

YASHKOV: It was a mix actually. In Baghdad they were all Baghdadi; in Kurdistan because it was a mix mostly staff from Kurdistan originally, but some staff who came from Baghdad. But it's not that easy for Iraqis from Baghdad to move to Kurdistan. It was in fact like a country with its own permits for work and settling in Erbil. The staff from Baghdad needed special permits for working and living in Erbil. We had several staff who had green cards, that added complications to handling payroll.

Q: So the staff was very international then?

YASHKOV: There was one Syrian guy. Iraqis from Baghdad and from Kurdistan. And Iraqis who had U.S. green cards.

Q: Okay.

YASHKOV: The green card holders are those under the special immigration visa program. But they were working in Kurdistan.

Q: That would put special requirements on them for taxation and things like that?

YASHKOV: Yes, exactly. It was complicated.

Q: Any observations on that work? Sounds like it went quite well and was relatively peaceful time and the work was able to proceed.

YASHKOV: There were no issues.

Q: Did you have any audits done of the program while you were there or any special issues with USAID?

YASHKOV: No issues. We had our own internal audit, which is actually more in-depth audit of programs just to be sure that everything is billed to USAID would not bounce or would not be questioned later. There were no issues.

Q: Did you lead that internal audit process?

YASHKOV: The internal audit, they were auditing my office – results of my job, basically.

Q: Oh, an internal audit from FHI 360.

YASHKOV: Right. It has its own vision for the internal audits, so they sent the staff that goes step by step through every single element of administration.

Q: Was this internal audit required as part of the contract? Or something extra FHI 360 did to ensure it was keeping good control over the program?

YASHKOV: I believe that all implementers have in one way or another their people who would conduct internal reviews and audits. It's not prescribed in the contract of agreement, no.

Q: Does it get paid for by the project? Or is it paid for outside the project?

YASHKOV: They have their own funds, out of the program.

Q: But that's something that's easier for large contractors to do than small contractors, right?

YASHKOV: Correct. Small organizations could not have the capacity to do something like that. They would have a compulsory audit (paid by USAID as a part of a project) like they had in Russia for example. There was an audit of the whole program after I left; I had a thank you letter later from FHI360 that there were no findings.

Q: Very good! (laughter)

YASHKOV: So that was good for me, for sure.

Q: Did you have much or any contact with USAID in Erbil or were you dealing with headquarters?

YASHKOV: No, nothing related to the program. There were some times if there were some questions from USAID Baghdad who would ask some information about money spent on this part. But not directly from USAID. Let's put it this way – if you opened my email box you would never find a single message from @usaid.gov.

Q: So the requests were through headquarters.

YASHKOV: Right, headquarters or chief of party of the project. He/she would have direct interaction with USAID. It was a protocol actually, that USAID would not send something directly to somebody with the actual data, but sent everything through chief of party or the home office.

Q: Interesting. I was curious whether the USAID people responsible for finance had contact with people responsible for finance in the implementing partners but I see that's not the case.

YASHKOV: No. It's usually, when I was working with USAID the interaction was with the headquarters except for the time in Russia when we would have this financial reviews; we could have questions directly to the field and that is because in Russia there was a significant number of the agreements directly with Russian implementing organizations, which would make them the reporting offices.

Q: I see the Russia experience was the unique experience!

YASHKOV: Exactly.

Q: Anything further on the time in Iraq? Thoughts about working in that kind of environment?

YASHKOV: Because they were seen as part of the diplomatic mission, it was difficult for USAID staff to move around and see projects and the actual implementation because of restrictions for security reasons. Implementing partners are much more flexible. When I was with Chemonics in Baghdad, there was a group that were kind of hidden in their in-town compound, they just blended in with the regular Baghdad's citizens, which was another way of being safe. But again it was all on an individual basis, how the implementing partners decided on security arrangements. But for the implementing partners it was difficult to meet USAID because it was in the Green Zone and Green Zone had its own rules for entering the zone, imposed by the government. Who can drive in and who can be driven into the zone – it was difficult just to meet people. I've never been to USAID in the Green Zone while I was there working for programs.

Q: You all really from your perspective were doing your thing while the chief of party was keeping AID informed; the rest of you operated much more independently.

YASHKOV: Yes.

Q: Okay. You continued that work with FHI until a bit more than a year ago; is that correct?

YASHKOV: There were two different FHI programs. I left Iraq and went back to Amman then in the same year I started working for civic initiative support program in Amman.

Q: So you were in Kurdistan for about a year with FHI 360?

YASHKOV: Yes, exactly a year. Then I passed my knowledge to my Iraqi colleague – we worked together and he took over the responsibilities. It was the same person in Kurdistan. By coincidence we ended up working for the same organizations.

Q: You departed and he became the director of grants and operations?

YASHKOV: Yes, he took over my responsibilities.

Q: Then you went to Amman to work on an FHI 360 project there?

YASHKOV: Yes.

Q: What was that project?

YASHKOV: Civic Initiative Support project. FHI was a donor for the grants, managing grants.

Q: So they were managing grants to local Jordanian organizations?

YASHKOV: Yes. Local NGOs (non-governmental organizations).

Q: And you were the director of grants?

YASHKOV: I was involved in the contractual part of the grants-giving process.

Q: What did this entail? Was this the beginning of this program?

YASHKOV: No, it was a follow-up program to a previous agreement of AED/FHI360 of building capacity of organizations. My function was finances, but mostly in working with grants processing, contractual parts for programs. It also involved budgeting, planning, setting-up a review team of people who were going to do this financial analysis of grants.

Q: Did this include doing pre-award survey work? Or had most of the grantees been grantees before?

YASHKOV: The pre-awards included comprehensive reviews of both technical and financial capacity, involving review committees, including USAID's reviews and approvals.

Q: So USAID was involved in the selection process. But the functions you performed were somewhat similar to what you did in Russia at USAID in terms of working with local NGOs.

YASHKOV: All the due-diligence process was done by FHI360. As for my function in this process, it was mostly contractual. Making sure all the necessary elements such as selection were done properly, financial terms of the agreement were correct. It was more as a contracting officer function.

Q: But you obviously had contact with USAID on this program.

YASHKOV: Yes. My responsibilities were at the stage where the grants were about to be signed; every single one had to be approved by USAID.

Q: Did that process work smoothly?

YASHKOV: It was smooth. Contracting officers and their representative at USAID was very good and very responsive. I don't think we had any issues. There was an issue of understanding of how the money was being spent, so-called burn rate, and how much money from the agreement with particular implementer was spent at the right time. The issue was with understanding of the billing versus the amounts spent because the amount shown as spent was much lower than the actual amount of grants signed. So because the grantee had to report to us first, then we report went to the home office and the home office reports to USAID.

Q: So there were time lines?

YASHKOV: Time lag – there were significant time lags - it looks as if there is not enough spent in the time frame. But actually because these could not be shown as spent if the grant was just awarded. But at the same time we needed money to be available for the implementer for FHI 360 to give these grants. They were given to FHI 360 in portions for actual obligations, formally could not be supported by the burn rate. So that was an issue, something that happened and took quite a long time for USAID to understand what the issue was about.

Q: Because you did multi-year grants. Sounds like USAID was looking at the implementation as well.

YASHKOV: Exactly. We could not sign an agreement with a grantee without having money available for us under the agreement with FHI360. At the end, we found the

resolution for the issue, which is basically imposing partial commitments of funds to the grantees in agreements with them.

Q: This again is Carol Peasley. This is the third session with Vlad Yashkov. Vlad, we were finishing up the discussion of your work with FHI 360. You had left Kurdistan and gone to Amman where you were working on a FHI 360 contract, a grant-making arrangement in which you were supporting Jordanian NGOs.

YASHKOV: Yes.

Q: You were the director of grants for that program, so involved with the selection process and monitoring all of the grants as they were being implemented.

YASHKOV: More the contractual sides of the grants process. As an individual responsible for the contractual side of the agreements, I was not a member of the selection committee for example. So there was no conflict of interest. It was objective, the selection and awarding process.

Q: Okay. As I recall, you perhaps had mentioned this segregation of duties – was this spelled out because of some difficulties previously with the program?

YASHKOV: No, no. Though they took over AED's business, FHI 360 has its own systems in place; everything that happened in the past has no relation to how FHI 360 operates.

Q: Very good. Is there anything further we need to discuss about that contractual work? I gather you concluded that work in September of 2015 or so?

YASHKOV: Yes. That's when my position was split into three, there were three positions created as the program was expanding. I passed my knowledge to Jordanians, so they continued with the program.

Q: So you have a good history of working to get systems in place and staff trained up and then when you departed, being replaced by host-country nationals which is the way it's supposed to work.

YASHKOV: Yes – that's the way it's supposed to be. The local staff should be doing this work. It's just at the beginning they need some guidance or information how things are done, and some training – and then they can do it.

Q: Do you think your experience as an FSN earlier in your career made it easier for you to play this function, and to appreciate that role of training and turning over to locals to give them the responsibility?

YASHKOV: Yes, absolutely. The whole experience with USAID obtaining knowledge on how this system operates and then passing the knowledge to others was key. It was a

part of my job at USAID, to provide training to local organizations and staff. Not just in Russia, in other countries too in the former Soviet Union – Armenia, Ukraine. That expanded with me moving to the Middle East. I would say it worked very well for me. Certain parts – again as I mentioned before, people should think about the direction they're moving in, because it's not a private sector career. It's a very specific field. I have been quite lucky with how it's worked for me, the whole experience. I would say it's a combination of luck and my own effort. As it is in anybody's career, there's an element of luck in how things work – good timing for things to happen.

Q: Let me just ask a question because much of your career did involve training. Did you ever receive any training on how to be a trainer? Or was it something you picked up as you were doing it, using your own techniques? Curious because often there is an investment in training people to be trainers, and you did lots of training.

YASHKOV: No, I haven't had any training to be a trainer. I guess anyone would pick up from their training how the training is conducted by the others while learning something as a trainee. But have I been trained how to be a trainer? No, I didn't have this.

Q: Would you say that both when you were at USAID in Russia, clearly part of your job was training as part of the financial analysis unit. But was there always an explicit objective in your work plans either as a consultant or in your work with USAID to get the staff you were working with trained up to replace you? Was there that specific objective to strengthen local leadership to take on functions?

YASHKOV: Building a local staff capacity so they can replace me was my personal objective. I've always felt it being an essential part of my job. I've always seen myself as a temporary solution for the project, with a goal of passing knowledge and through experience to the local staff, living a functional legacy behind.

Q: On the contracts, was it an explicit part of your job?

YASHKOV: In most contracts that would not be the case, though the contract would state that I should be training local staff. I always had intention of training local staff to bring their capacity and knowledge to the level to do their jobs, in their positions. But I've never had something that mentioned that my mission would be, once I'd trained someone, that position would be replaced with a local position. It was more my personal goal to be sure the local staff knows how to do the job without somebody from outside supervising or directing. People have enough knowledge and education and capacity in most places. In places where they don't have it, it takes a little bit longer to bring to that level. But that's the ultimate goal – for people to take over the job and do it themselves. In Russia it was moving away from awarding U.S. organizations that would manage programs in Russia and awarding more within Russia, Russian NGOs.

Q: Many of these lessons are important as USAID tries to continue to expand its work with local organizations. I think you have some important experiences that they will learn from.

More generally Vlad is there anything else to say on your career and the job front that you have? Or should we move onto concluding thoughts that you might have about your career with USAID in particular? Thoughts you might have on the roles of FSNs in USAID missions, on how to strengthen capacity within USAID missions – any thoughts you might have on just how USAID uses FSNs and supports local organizations.

YASHKOV: Regarding the mission, the way the local staff capacity is utilized and how much reliance is on local staff. It depends on the initial level of education and existing knowledge. For example eastern European countries people are well educated; in the Middle East in Jordan, also. There are cultural differences, for sure. It's individual from one mission to another; it would not apply universally to all missions because of the initial capacity level. FSNs have more widened knowledge of the local environment – how the country generally works; something that most of the foreign staff wouldn't know, naturally, unless they spent their life in the country they wouldn't know how it works or doesn't work. Listening to the local staff is very important in how these things work or don't work. It's all very individual, country to country. Definitely having the local staff working for USAID is very important. Local staff is the connection to the country environment, I would say. Working with for example Sudanese and Jordanians, I learned a lot – the way I work in this environment, and just even culturally it's all different and needs to be taken into consideration.

Q: Right. You're absolutely right that every mission has its own culture and the degree to which that is appreciated or not appreciated. It is very difficult to generalize.

Any concluding thoughts, Vlad, before we wrap this up, that you'd like to share?

Concluding Thoughts

YASHKOV: With regard to working with USAID and its programs was very rewarding in all aspects of my life, including meeting USAID people.

Q: Can I ask a question on Russia? We all know USAID was asked by the government of Russia to leave; it wasn't the nicest end to what was an almost 20 year period of very good collaboration and cooperation. Do you think that 10 or 15 years from now there will be people that will appreciate the partnership that did exist between the U.S. and Russia through the '90s and early 2000s, where lots of Russian organizations, NGOs and think tanks and other groups really evolved out of the partnership – do you think there will be appreciation of that?

YASHKOV: I'm pretty sure there is and it will stay especially in programs we've already mentioned, like Junior Achievement program. Health programs like the HIV/AIDS programs – these are where you can recognize the programs that were well accepted by the government. Programs for people with disabilities – they had a big impact and they were a booster for the organizations that worked in these fields, to continue working, to get ideas how things need to be done. I'm pretty sure people will remember these

programs and will remember them as something that we did give the country, something to think about, to work on and to further develop.

Q: It's obviously nice to hear that you think there has been some lasting impact and it is appreciated and will continue to be.

YASHKOV: Absolutely. Those people who have had personal experience working with USAID programs will definitely appreciate the efforts.

Q: Good. Any final thoughts?

YASHKOV: We live in a time of changes in the way the assistance programs are seen. I am thinking of the programs involvement in the areas such as politics. It is very difficult to take into account all of the variables that could play in this area, resulting in adverse effects or misunderstanding of the purpose and complete rejection. In this case, not getting involved, or, simply, staying neutral, might be the best approach in the long term.

Q: That's an important perspective to share. Let me thank you very much for spending as much time as you have.

YASHKOV: Thank you so much for this opportunity to share my thoughts. They are my thoughts and represent my views, and that's the way it should be!

End of interview