On Monday, February 23, 2015 Sarah Mendelson from the Center for Strategic International Studies (CSIS) gave a lecture entitled “Why Governments are Targeting Civil Society and What Social Scientists Can Do About It” as part of the Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series.

After a brief introduction from Einaudi Center Director and Vice Provost for International Affairs Fred Logevall, Dr. Mendelson framed her discussion with current examples of governments targeting nongovernmental organizations, media organizations, and civil society in general, to prove the relevance of the issue.

Mendelson provided examples from most of the continents, and the implications of government actions in various sectors, such as public health and humanitarian assistance, security and conflict prevention, natural disaster relief, as well as the broader development issues.

The threat and its broader implications to international development as a whole, however, has not gone unrecognized: in 2013 and 2014, President Obama addressed it on the margins of the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution within the following year, and, most recently, the U.S. National Security Strategy (February 2015) addressed the importance of a vibrant civil society and the growing restrictions around the world.

Just as recognition of these threats has increased, so has knowledge regarding the various reasons for “closing space” around civil society. Mendelson addressed these reasons, articulating a potential animus between governments and “open activism,” including but not limited to increased connectivity and transparency granted by technology, as well as the tensions found in the varying sources of funding for NGOs, increasing anti-Americanism worldwide, the use and abuse of counterterrorism policies, and religious arguments.
Mendelson ended her lecture with different suggestions on how individuals can improve the current situation, but cautioned that there was no panacea and that attempts needed to be adjusted according to each situation.

The Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series features prominent leaders in international affairs who can address topical issues from a variety of perspectives. The Speaker Series is part of the Foreign Policy Initiative at Cornell University led by the Einaudi Center to maximize the intellectual impact of Cornell's outstanding resources in this area.