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**Words into Action:  
The Future of Security Sector  
Governance**

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## DCAF 25th Anniversary Strategic Dialogue

Event report

# Words into Action: The Future of Security Sector Governance

27 November 2025  
Geneva

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## Overview

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To commemorate its **25th anniversary**, DCAF - Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance convened a high-level Strategic Dialogue bringing together partners, national authorities, civil society representatives, academics, and practitioners from around the world. The event offered an important opportunity to reflect on two and a half decades of Security Sector Governance (SSG) practice, examine today's rapidly evolving challenges, and explore the pathways needed to strengthen accountable, effective, and inclusive security in a world marked by profound uncertainty.

**Cristina Finch**, Head of the Partnerships & Development at DCAF, welcomed participants to the Dialogue and expressed gratitude for the long-standing collaboration of member states, partners, and practitioners. She emphasised that the anniversary is both a moment of celebration and an opportunity to reflect on lessons learned, renew collective ambition, and reaffirm DCAF's commitment to translating principles into practical, sustainable impact.

Under the theme **“Words into Action: The Future of Security Sector Governance,”** the Dialogue explored how SSG can uphold human dignity, stabilise fragile political environments, and foster resilience at a time of converging pressures—shifting geopolitics, democratic backsliding, transnational insecurity, digital disruption, rapid technological evolution, climate impacts, and deepening social inequalities.

Opening the event, **Ambassador Nathalie Chuard**, Director of DCAF, emphasised that

“Security Sector Governance, which is at the core of DCAF's mandate, is a cornerstone in building stability and bringing security and safety for the people.” She warned that the current moment—marked by disregard for international humanitarian law in several conflict theatres and eroding civic space—requires renewed commitment to accountable, people-centred governance approaches. Making security institutions “more accountable, inclusive and effective,” she underscored, “is now more essential than ever.”

**Ambassador Tim Enderlin**, Head of the Peace and Human Rights Division (PHRD) of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, stressed that DCAF's 25th anniversary is “more than just an institutional milestone,” but a reminder that security built on “trust, dialogue and human dignity” is essential. He recalled that Switzerland created DCAF and its sister centres\* to support peace and the rules-based international order—an ambition “perhaps even more relevant today” amid geopolitical competition, erosion of norms, climate pressures, technological change and democratic backsliding. In such uncertainty, “how security institutions are governed becomes crucial,” with transparent, accountable institutions proving more resilient. Turning “words into action,” he highlighted four essentials for effective SSG: people-centred security, locally owned reforms, accountability and transparency, and inclusion as a foundation for sustainable peace.

**Ambassador Didier Chassot**, Assistant Director General, Head, Europe and Middle East Division, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), closed the event by emphasising that DCAF's 25th anniversary marks a milestone of “sustained relevance, credibility and impact,” reflecting Switzerland's long-standing belief that security grounded in good governance, trust and integrity is essential for peace. He recalled that the three Geneva Centres were created as instruments of Swiss foreign policy to strengthen the rules-based international order, and highlighted DCAF's evolution from its early work in Eastern Europe to a global reference point active in over sixty countries, including some of the world's most fragile contexts. In today's increasingly polarised environment, he stressed that transparent, accountable and people-centred

\* Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD)



governance remains vital, thanking DCAF and its partners for advancing reforms that place people's rights, dignity and safety at the heart of security policy.

The anniversary programme included three high-level panels:

- 1. The Future of Security Sector Governance in a Changing Geo-Political World**
- 2. Rethinking SSG in Syria, Lebanon, and the Middle East**
- 3. Inclusive Security for Global Safety – Overcoming the Barriers**

Across the panels, speakers underscored how security governance is increasingly shaped by overlapping pressures, including war and geopolitical competition, cross-border crime and terrorism, digital manipulation, climate-related fragility, shrinking civic space, resistance to inclusion, and fiscal constraints. Yet they also pointed to opportunities to rebuild trust, adapt governance models, and strengthen inclusion. The discussions reaffirmed DCAF's core mission: helping states, communities and institutions develop accountable, effective and inclusive security rooted in human dignity and democratic principles. The insights will guide DCAF's future strategic direction and reinforce its commitment to serving as a trusted partner in complex environments.

## Acknowledgements

DCAF wishes to express its sincere appreciation to all participants, speakers, moderators, and staff for their contributions to the organisation and implementation of this event. DCAF is deeply grateful to all its partners, including Switzerland, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, for their continuous engagement and support.



Ambassador Tim Enderlin delivering his opening address at the plenary session.



**250**  
participants



**16** speakers  
from **11** countries



**91** organizations  
and **25** permanent  
missions in attendance





## Panel 1

# The Future of Security Sector Governance in a Changing Geo-Political World

- **Dr. Uju Agomoh**, Founder & Executive Director, PRAWA; Executive Committee Member, African Security Sector Network (ASSN)
- **Dr. Fonteh Akum**, Executive Director, Institute for Security Studies (ISS)
- **Prof. Dr. Aries A. Arugay**, Professor of Political Science, University of the Philippines
- **Dunja Mijatović**, Former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights and OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media
- **Moderator: Béatrice Godefroy**, Deputy Director, DCAF

## Discussion summary

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Opening the discussion, **Béatrice Godefroy** noted that the global landscape in which Security Sector Governance (SSG) operates has changed dramatically since DCAF was founded: democratic backsliding, conflict resurgence, rapid technological disruptions, and information disorder have transformed both threats and expectations placed on security actors. She underlined that the panel aims to explore what 25 years of practice have taught us — and what these lessons mean for the future.

**Prof. Dr. Aries A. Arugay** reflected on the origins of SSG during the “unipolar moment,” when democratic transitions across regions enabled ambitious projects to strengthen civil–military relations and embed human-centred governance. He highlighted that two decades of scholarship and practice have reinforced one central truth: SSG is inherently political. “The reform processes are deeply political,” he noted, and cannot be insulated from domestic interests, incentive structures, conflict economies, and the social consensus that emerges after authoritarianism or conflict. He called for integrating SSG more explicitly into geopolitical and geo-economic debates, especially as global polarisation accelerates defence spending and reshapes security priorities.

**Dr. Uju Agomoh** built on this argument by emphasising the primacy of trust, relationships, and political incentives. Her PARCELS framework (Partnership, Apprenticeship, Relationship, Citizenship, Entrepreneurship, Leadership, Stewardship) illustrates how alliances and behaviour are often dictated by perceptions of fear and threat rather than formal structures. She warned that “theories don’t work; importing ideas from elsewhere doesn’t work,” insisting that sustainable SSG must view people not as problems but as central actors whose perceptions, even when inaccurate, shape legitimacy and compliance. Recognising unconscious biases and strengthening whole-of-society approaches are, in her view, essential.

Drawing on her decades of experience in human rights oversight, **Dunja Mijatović** offered a sobering reflection: “Security must serve people, not power.” She described how politicisation and intimidation by security institutions lead not to safety but to fragility. “More security does

not mean safer societies,” she cautioned. She emphasised the collapse of trust that occurs when safeguards are bypassed under political pressure, particularly during crises. Oversight bodies, independent media, and human rights defenders, she argued, are indispensable, and their erosion is often the first casualty of shrinking democratic space. “No technical assistance, no training, no equipment can compensate for weak rule of law,” she warned.

**Dr. Fonteh Akum** provided a structural perspective on the continent’s shifting security governance context. He described three “generations” of SSG and SSR engagement—from the post-Cold War focus on human security, to integration into DDR processes and peace agreements, to today’s landscape where coups have re-emerged. He argued that reform is non-linear: “two steps forward, three steps back — but an opportunity to re-engage and draw lessons.” He highlighted the cross-border erosion of security through transnational organised crime, terrorism, and hybrid threats, and called for greater attention to AI-driven manipulation and the increasing power of private technology actors. He also urged greater attention to debt burdens and financial sustainability, often underexamined as constraints on governance.

Across interventions, a shared message emerged: SSG must respond to new geopolitical realities while remaining grounded in legitimacy, accountability, inclusion, and trust. As **Béatrice Godefroy** summarised, progress depends on political courage, multi-stakeholder engagement, and a better understanding of incentives that shape behaviour in complex environments.







## **Panel 2**

# **Rethinking SSG in Syria, Lebanon, and the Middle East**

- **H.E. Tarek Mitri**, Deputy Prime Minister of Lebanon
- **H.E. Yasser Al Jundi**, Head of the Diplomatic Institute, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Syrian Arab Republic
- **H.E. Rislal Shibrahim**, Security Advisor to the Vice President of the State of Palestine
- **Dr. Trude Strand**, Deputy Head, Middle East and North Africa Division, DCAF
- **Moderator: Ambassador Nathalie Chuard**, Director, DCAF

## Discussion summary

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Introducing the panel, **Ambassador Nathalie Chuard** underlined that Security Sector Governance is foundational to stability in the Middle East, yet extremely challenging to advance in environments marked by conflict, fragmentation, and external pressures. She invited the speakers to reflect on both the obstacles and the openings for reform.

**H.E. Tarek Mitri** offered a long-term perspective on Lebanon, noting that its security challenges have long been shaped by internal divisions and regional interference. He described an emerging “new era” in Lebanese–Syrian relations grounded in aspirations for cooperation and mutual respect of sovereignty, while acknowledging that instability along the southern border continues to pressure state institutions and complicate reforms. He underlined the central role of the Lebanese Armed Forces, whose broad public trust is essential to restoring state authority, but stressed that this must be reinforced through stronger accountability and improved operational capacity. Lebanon’s long-term objective, he noted, is to rebuild a security landscape in which the state alone holds legitimate authority — a process requiring time, political consensus and sustained institutional development. He also highlighted progress toward more rights-respecting practices and the value of DCAF’s support in professionalising governance, supervision and training.

**H.E. Rislan Shihrahim** presented the Palestinian perspective, explaining that “all challenges fall under the same factor: occupation.” He outlined how the occupation limits the ability of Palestinian security institutions to protect civilians, notably in the face of settler violence, given that Palestinian forces “can never arrest settlers” under existing agreements. Since October 7, he added, “nothing has been as before,” with Palestinians widely perceived as enemies and movement severely restricted. Despite these obstacles, he affirmed the Palestinian Authority’s commitment to reform, noting that upcoming changes are not merely a reaction to international demands but build on years of work with DCAF. Palestinians, he stressed, “deserve security services that can protect their lives and dignity.”

**H.E. Yasser Al Jundi** offered an account of Syria’s profound challenges after decades of

repression, conflict, and territorial fragmentation. He characterised pre-transition Syria as “a barbarian state — a state of war and terror,” where citizens came to perceive security institutions as adversaries. He described efforts in liberated areas to “dismantle” former forces, establish academies, unify leadership structures, create anti-corruption bodies, digitise administrative processes, and adopt a public code of conduct. He underlined that rebuilding cohesion requires rebuilding trust: “Without trust between the security sector and civilians, cohesion will never happen.” He also outlined a vetting approach allowing individuals who served under the former regime but committed no crimes to reintegrate, thereby balancing justice with operational capacity.

Reflecting on these interventions, **Dr. Trude Strand** underscored that complexity requires adaptive, long-term engagement rooted in principles. Opportunities do exist, she stressed: reforms are shaped by political convergence, regional dynamics, and moments of potential transformation. DCAF’s model of accompaniment, grounded in national ownership and partnership over decades, is key. “What we heard represents a lot of hope,” she concluded, particularly in communities’ desire for legitimate, accountable security.

**Ambassador Nathalie Chuard** closed the panel by noting that, despite the challenges faced across the region, all three contexts reflect a clear commitment to building more accountable and trusted security institutions. She emphasised that DCAF will continue to support these nationally driven efforts with long-term, principled engagement.





## Panel 3

# Inclusive Security for Global Safety — Overcoming the Barriers

- **Dr. Lara Scarpitta**, Senior Adviser on Gender Issues, OSCE
- **Per-Roe Petlund**, Consultant on Women, Peace and Security; formerly Norwegian Armed Forces
- **Sofia Calltorp**, Director, UN Women Geneva Office and UN Women's Chief of Humanitarian Action (online)
- **Jacqueline O'Neill**, Director, Transnational Conflict Analysis and Support, Global Affairs Canada (online)
- **Moderator: Nathalie Gendre**, Head of Gender and Security, DCAF



## Discussion summary

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Opening the session, **Nathalie Gendre** framed inclusive security as a core pillar of DCAF's mandate and a proven determinant of effective security governance. She emphasised that security institutions gain legitimacy, operational effectiveness and public trust when women and marginalised groups are meaningfully involved. Yet, as she noted, inclusion is often misunderstood as an additive exercise rather than a transformational one: "security cannot be effective if it is not inclusive." With this, she invited the panel to explore why resistance persists and how institutions can move from commitment to practice.

**Sofia Calltorp** began by stressing that gender inclusion is fundamentally linked to accountability and legitimacy. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by conflict, and their exclusion from decision-making leads to blind spots and weaker outcomes. She argued that resistance often emerges from fear of challenging established hierarchies rather than from lack of evidence or awareness. Sustained progress, she explained, requires embedding inclusion into leadership performance frameworks, financial structures and operational planning. In humanitarian crises, women's participation in decision-making has a direct impact on the success of both emergency response and long-term peacebuilding.

Adding a geopolitical perspective, **Jacqueline O'Neill** described the scale and organisation of contemporary anti-gender movements, which she characterised as strategic, well-coordinated and well-funded. These networks deliberately exploit misinformation to undermine gender equality initiatives and target women in leadership roles. She cited Canada's own experience with disinformation campaigns following the appointment of its first female Chief of Defence Staff, stressing that institutions must anticipate and prepare for such attacks. She highlighted the value of practical tools like the MOWIP barriers assessment, which reveals hidden institutional obstacles and replaces assumptions with evidence.

**Per-Roe Petlund** brought a practitioner's lens from military operations. He observed that resistance within security institutions is often cultural, rooted in traditions of forces historically

designed "by men, for men." Beyond ideological resistance, he pointed to widespread gaps in understanding how gender perspectives enhance situational awareness, community engagement and mission outcomes. Drawing on examples — including gender-responsive election security planning and the creation of mixed patrols — he demonstrated that inclusive approaches can significantly improve operational effectiveness. For many commanders, he noted, evidence of improved mission results is the most compelling driver of change.

From a multilateral viewpoint, **Dr. Lara Scarpitta** stressed that inclusive security must be embedded within comprehensive reform agendas that span political, military, economic and human-rights dimensions. She highlighted the role of multilateral organisations in providing norms, standards, platforms for dialogue and accountability frameworks. Cultural transformation, she argued, is as critical as doctrinal reform: training, institutional education and structured exchanges with civil society all help build environments where inclusion becomes standard practice rather than an exception.

Closing the session, **Nathalie Gendre** underlined three common threads: inclusion must be intentional, partnerships are indispensable, and progress may be uneven but is unquestionably achievable. The panel demonstrated that despite resistance, inclusive security is both possible and urgently needed — and remains central to DCAF's mission for the next 25 years.



## Key takeaways

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- **SSG is deeply political and must adapt to a rapidly evolving security landscape.**

Reforms cannot be reduced to technical exercises. They must address political incentives, elite interests, governance deficits and social divisions to be sustainable.

- **Trust is foundational.**

Whether in global or local contexts, trust between institutions and communities determines the legitimacy and effectiveness of security actors.

- **Human rights and oversight remain non-negotiable pillars.**

Security without rights leads to fragility, impunity and weakened public confidence.

- **National ownership is essential, especially in conflict-affected settings.**

Reforms in Lebanon, Palestine and Syria highlight that sustainable SSG depends on local leadership, contextual understanding and long-term accompaniment.

- **Inclusive security enhances operational effectiveness and legitimacy.**

Evidence shows that gender-responsive and inclusive approaches improve situational awareness, crisis response, peacebuilding and institutional resilience.

- **Resistance to inclusion is widespread but can be addressed.**

Entrenched traditions, hierarchical structures, misinformation and political manipulation must be countered through leadership accountability, training and targeted incentives.

- **Multilateral cooperation remains crucial.**

Global and regional platforms must defend norms, support oversight bodies, and strengthen early-warning and digital governance mechanisms.

- **Reform requires time, partnership and realism.**

Change is incremental, often contested, but still possible when supported by principled engagement and strong alliances.



Ambassador Didier Chassot sharing his closing remarks.

## Action items

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### Panel 1 — Global SSG Trends

- **Strengthen political economy analysis in all programming.**  
Ensure reforms take into account incentives, power structures and governance deficits.
- **Invest in foresight and technology governance.**  
Support partners in addressing risks linked to AI, disinformation, cyber tools and digital surveillance.
- **Reinforce oversight ecosystems.**  
Support parliaments, media, civil society and independent oversight bodies to rebuild trust and accountability.
- **Promote cross-border and regional approaches.**  
Address transnational threats (crime, terrorism, misinformation, hybrid actors) with coordinated strategies.

### Panel 2 — Middle East (Lebanon, Palestine, Syria)

- **Deepen long-term accompaniment in fragile environments.**  
Maintain continuous engagement with national counterparts to support reform processes over time.
- **Support professionalisation and institutional resilience.**  
Focus on training, codes of conduct, justice processes, and rights-based approaches.
- **Expand work on trust-building.**  
Promote mechanisms that enhance accountability and transparency between

security institutions and populations.

- **Strengthen preparedness for future governance arrangements.**

In contexts such as Gaza, accompany partners in planning for transitional, post-conflict or hybrid phases.

### Panel 3 — Inclusive Security

- **Institutionalise gender analysis in all SSG programming.**  
Make gender perspectives a core requirement of threat assessments, planning and operations.
- **Scale up the use of barrier assessment tools (e.g. MOWIP).**  
Help institutions identify real obstacles to inclusion and track progress transparently.
- **Support leadership accountability frameworks.**  
Encourage partners to embed gender equality and inclusion in performance evaluations and resource allocation.
- **Strengthen protection against disinformation and backlash.**  
Build partner capacity to anticipate and counter targeted misinformation that undermines inclusivity.
- **Expand support to local women's organisations.**  
Recognise their central role in crisis response, peacebuilding and community resilience.





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## About DCAF

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DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance is dedicated to improving the security of states and their people within a framework of democratic governance, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and gender equality. Since its founding in 2000, DCAF has contributed to making peace and development more sustainable by assisting partner states, and international actors supporting these states, to improve the governance of their security sector through inclusive and participatory reforms. It creates innovative knowledge products, promotes norms and good practices, provides legal and policy advice, and supports capacitybuilding of both state and non-state security sector stakeholders.