

Testimony of Stephen M. Schwartz
Nominee for Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Somalia
March 10, 2016
Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Cardin, and Members of the Committee, it is an honor to appear before you today to be considered for the position of United States Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Somalia. I am sincerely grateful to President Obama and Secretary Kerry for the confidence they have shown in me through this nomination.

Mr. Chairman, please allow me at this time to introduce my family. With me today are my wife, Kristy Cook, and our two children, Hannah and Jonas. The Foreign Service offers families unusual opportunities and challenges, and I thank each of them for their support and sacrifice. In addition, I would like to pay tribute to my father Robert, who is recovering from surgery and was unable to travel; and to my late mother, Carole, who died just two months before I began my Foreign Service career. Their influence continues to shape and motivate me every day.

Mr. Chairman, the people of Somalia are regaining control of their country and intensified U.S. engagement is vital to their success, and to ours. With measured but real progress over the last few years, Somalia is no longer a “failed state,” but a fragile, recovering country with promise. Somalia’s vibrant diaspora members are returning to help reconstruct their nation and, in so doing, are renewing and strengthening the linkages between the United States and Somalia.

On a governmental level, we are doing the same. The Somali government reestablished its embassy in Washington, D.C. last November, after a 24-year absence. Two years earlier, the United States officially recognized the Federal Government of Somalia for the first time in 21 years.

Last May, Secretary Kerry became the first Secretary of State ever to visit Somalia. While there, he announced that planning had begun to reestablish U.S. diplomatic premises in Mogadishu. As a first step, in September we established the U.S. Mission to Somalia, co-located in Embassy Nairobi. If confirmed, fulfilling the Secretary’s commitment will be one of my top priorities, with the safety and security of U.S. government personnel always foremost among my considerations.

Mr. Chairman, our policy for Somalia is focused on three key areas: security, governance institutions, and relief and development. For security, our top priority is to degrade al-Shabaab, an al-Qaida affiliate, so it is no longer a pernicious and destabilizing force. If confirmed, I will help lead our efforts to support and strengthen the African Union Mission in Somalia, better known as AMISOM, while we work to build the capacity of the Somali military and police so that they can assume responsibility for their own country’s security.

Security gains have created space for political progress and state formation, as outlined in Somalia's "Vision 2016." Much more work needs to be done to hold a referendum on a permanent national constitution; complete the creation of Federal Member States and establish functioning governmental authorities; and to adopt rules governing political parties and an electoral process. If confirmed, I will lead the United States government's efforts to help Somalia build these institutions as the foundations of durable, accountable, inclusive, and effective governance.

To grow the economy and build capacity, the United States has supported the New Deal Compact as the basis of a strong, Somali-led development partnership. If confirmed, I will redouble our efforts to work with Somali authorities, civil society, the private sector, and the international community to improve education, support growth and employment in key economic sectors, and help Somalis realize a better future in areas liberated from al Shabaab's oppressive rule.

Over two decades of conflict have left over a million Somalis displaced in their own country, and almost a million as refugees in neighboring countries. More than 700,000 Somalis are estimated to be acutely malnourished, many of them children. The United States is committed to addressing humanitarian needs in Somalia and supports efforts to achieve durable solutions.

Mr. Chairman, Somalia has many challenges, but it is moving in the right direction. My nomination is a reflection of both our deepening relationship with the country and its people, and our faith that better times are ahead. I can assure you that, if confirmed, it will be my honor to lead our mission as the first United States Ambassador to Somalia in over twenty-five years. I will work hard to advance U.S. interests, and strengthen our bilateral relationship. I look forward to the opportunity to work with the Committee to achieve those goals.