

**Testimony of Cynthia Kierscht**  
**Nominee to be Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania**  
**Senate Foreign Relations Committee**  
**Wednesday, December 2, 2020**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Committee, it is an honor to appear before you today as the President's nominee to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. I appreciate the confidence the President and Secretary of State have placed in me through this nomination.

Mr. Chairman, I would first like to express my deep appreciation for the love and support of my family, friends, and colleagues. In particular, I would like to recognize my mother, Dr. Marcia Kierscht, who has been an excellent role model and visited me at every post, and my late grandmother, Cynthia Selland, who, as a North Dakota public school teacher for 45 years taught geography, among other subjects, and from whom I no doubt got much inspiration for this journey. I am also grateful for the love and support of my brother, Matthew, and his family.

In my thirty years of public service, it has been a privilege to represent the American people and to support and protect American citizens and interests abroad. My experiences in North Africa – in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco – have prepared me to recognize the strategic nature of Mauritania's unique geography, situated between the Maghreb and the Sahel, and its potential impact on our economic and security interests. In my recent service as Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, I have witnessed the power of citizens to bring about positive change at the ballot box and the impact this change can have on the important issues of good governance, the rule of law, and human rights.

When I look at Mauritania, I see potential: the potential for transformational progress on democratic governance, inclusion, and human rights, the potential for economic prosperity

through bilateral trade and investment, and the potential to be a regional leader in security and counterterrorism. If confirmed, promoting Mauritania's potential in these areas will be my primary objective because it is in our economic and security interest to have a stable, democratic, and accountable Mauritania as a partner in the region.

Let me start with human rights. For far too long, Mauritania had a poor record on human rights that it hesitated to address. Not only was it the last country in the world to outlaw slavery, but government officials continued to deny its very existence until fairly recently. This is no longer the case. Since President Ghazouani's 2019 inauguration, Mauritania has made significant strides to address its legacy of slavery. The country is on the right track and our engagement serves to encourage their better inclinations. Tools provided by the U.S. Congress in the form of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) eligibility criteria and the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) ranking restrictions helped demonstrate the costs of undermining human rights. The Mauritanian government's approval of new anti-trafficking legislation, establishment of a ministerial committee charged with implementing the TIP recommendations, and adoption of an anti-trafficking national action plan demonstrate its political will to address this issue. Today, we seem to have a partner in the Ghazouani administration to make real headway on longstanding human rights and governance concerns and, if confirmed, I will seek to ensure this progress continues.

With progress on human rights comes the potential for increased economic prosperity through bilateral trade and investment. It is no secret that U.S. companies not only produce and sell high-quality products and services, but they also improve the commercial climate when it comes to business ethics, transparency, and development of local talent. Some of our hydrocarbon companies are already exploring opportunities in Mauritania, with great success.

U.S. businesses have also invested in the agricultural sector, but more can be done. Mauritanian fisheries are a potential market for U.S. investment and an area ripe for export to the United States. If confirmed, I will work with the U.S. interagency and the U.S. private sector to promote mutual economic prosperity.

Finally, Mauritania has demonstrated great potential on the key issues of security and counterterrorism. Regional efforts to ensure stability should focus on countering violent extremism and recruitment in the Sahel and denying terrorists a base of operations from which they can pose a threat on a more global scale. A founding member and current president of the G5 Sahel and a success story in countering violent extremism, Mauritania is willing and able to take on a leadership role to share its lessons learned with the region. In February, Mauritania hosted the FLINTLOCK exercise, comprised of 1500 troops from 30 countries, working together to strengthen the ability of partner nations to counter violent extremist organizations, protect their borders, and provide security for their people. Reaffirming its commitment to countering terrorism, Mauritania recently joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, strengthening the coalition's efforts to ensure ISIS's enduring defeat in the region. Mauritania's whole-of-government approach to combating terrorism has garnered U.S. support for both its military and law enforcement agencies tasked with pursuing terrorism. If confirmed, I will continue to build upon the relationship we have with the Mauritanian security forces and deepen collaboration with the G5 Sahel Secretariat based in Nouakchott. Having served two tours in the Bureau of Counterterrorism, I personally understand the stakes at hand. I can also assure you that, if confirmed, the safety and security of all American citizens in Mauritania would be my highest priority.

In closing, Mauritania is a land of potential, both for the Mauritians and for the United States. If confirmed, I look forward to working with the Embassy team, the interagency, Congress, American businesses and non-governmental organizations, and our Mauritanian partners to ensure that this potential is fully realized to the benefit of all.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, members of the Committee, I thank you for this opportunity to appear before you and look forward to your questions.