

DFOP0019227: Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC)

Frequently Asked Questions

Updated September 15, 2026

Question 1: Which areas of research are eligible?

MERC remains open to concepts from across scientific disciplines. Any applied science topic may be considered so long as the concept addresses the review criteria. One of the review criteria is "Relevance to priorities of the United States." Pre-identified areas of relevance to the United States are featured within Section C.2. of the NOFO (page 8).

Question 2: What is meant by advancing "U.S. economic competitiveness and technological leadership"?

As noted within Section B.1. of the NOFO (page 7), MERC prioritizes projects that advance U.S. economic competitiveness and technological leadership; promote the adoption and integration of U.S. technologies; strengthen strategic regional partnerships; address regionally relevant challenges in ways that also advance U.S. interests; and enable scalable, market-driven solutions.

More specific examples, could include projects that:

- Create opportunities for U.S. companies to sell, export, license, or deploy U.S. technologies in MENA markets;
- Demonstrate or validate U.S. technologies in real-world conditions;
- Strengthen U.S. research and commercial partnerships with Israeli and other MENA institutions;
- Open pathways to follow-on investment, commercialization, or market adoption for U.S. innovations; or
- Reduce reliance on competing foreign technologies by promoting the adoption of U.S. technologies, standards, expertise, and supply chains.

These examples are illustrative, not prescriptive, nor is this an exhaustive list.

Question 3: I have a concept focused on a research area not listed among the priority areas on pg. 8 of the NOFO. Will this concept be competitive?

Any applied scientific or technical research topic may be competitive if it is responsive to the objectives and review criteria outlined in the NOFO. The Department cannot determine the competitiveness of a specific concept in advance of submission of a statement of interest (SOI) and submissions will be evaluated competitively against the review criteria in the NOFO.

Question 4: Which topics in health security will be considered?

Review the publicly available America First Global Health Strategy which is linked in the NOFO (page 8) for a sense of the U.S. administration's priorities in this sector.

Question 5: Can I resubmit a proposal that was previously considered by the MERC Program?

Yes, see Section B.4. (page 6) of the NOFO entitled "Previously Submitted Concepts."

Per the NOFO, you may resubmit a previously declined concept, but the SOI must be substantially revised in response to the requirements and review criteria of **this** NOFO. Resubmitted SOIs that have not been substantially revised may be declined without review. Applicants with questions about resubmitting previously submitted concepts are encouraged to contact the MERC Program at nea-grants@state.gov (include "MERC" in the subject line). This answer also applies to projects that were previously terminated.

Question 6: How can I identify potential collaborators?

We recommend you employ the normal tools of professional networking to identify potential collaborators, including looking for publications and the websites of researchers in your area of interest.

If this approach is unsuccessful, or you need additional support, you are welcome to send a short summary of your interests to nea-grants@state.gov (include "MERC" in the subject line) and we can connect you with a support team who may be able to recommend relevant organizations that are also seeking collaborators.

Question 7: Which institution should submit the SOI or lead the consortium?

Any member of the consortium, from any country or organization type, may apply as the lead, or prime, institution. Bear in mind that the responsibilities of prime recipients of federal awards, as defined by 2 CFR 200, include maintaining proper financial management and internal controls, executing mandatory risk assessments and monitoring of subrecipients, and ensuring compliance with all federal cost principles and reporting requirements. Additionally, the prime recipient will need to have a valid registration in SAM.gov prior to the submission of a full application as described within Section B.3. of the NOFO (pages 5 and 6).

Question 8: Are satellite or portal campuses of U.S. universities eligible recipients?

As noted within Section B.1. of the NOFO (page 4), satellite or portal campus of non-regional institutions, including U.S. universities, do not meet the requirement of being a Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region organization. Such organizations may be eligible recipients as a member of a broader consortium, but they alone will not address the NOFO's minimum requirement of engaging a MENA country organization.

Question 9: It is a requirement to include a U.S. private sector company among the consortium of applicants?

As described within Section B.1. of the NOFO, the inclusion of a U.S. co-applicant (recipient) is optional. However, MERC encourages the inclusion of U.S. private sector companies, either as co-applicants (sub-recipients with their own budget) or key stakeholders (an entity that is engaged in the project but not receiving their own budget), to advance commercial outcomes. Applicants may include a U.S. company to address the review criteria of "relevance to priorities of the United States" and "likely impact and commercial potential" (see Section F.2., page 21) of the NOFO.

Question 10: Is a U.S. company registered in a MENA country considered a MENA organization for the purposes of meeting the NOFO's minimum eligibility requirements?

Possibly. As guiding principles, applicants should consider if their consortium of proposed implementers advances the MERC program's objective of "enabling direct cooperation, strengthening peaceful partnerships, and establishing durable working relationships between individuals, organizations, and communities in Israel and the broader Middle East and North Africa region" and addresses the review criterion of "strength and durability of regional cooperation" (see Section F.2., page 21).

Question 11: Should U.S. commercial entities participate as formal sub-recipients, or is it preferable to structure them as contractual vendors/service providers?

See the answer to Question 9. U.S. private sector companies may be engaged either as co-applicants (sub-recipients with their own budget) or key stakeholders (an entity that is engaged in the project but not receiving their own budget).

The NOFO does not indicate a preference in management/award structure, nor does the program have a preference. Applicants should structure their proposed project in the way they believe is most responsive to the NOFO and is most effective for implementing their proposed work plan.

Question 12: Does the MERC program maintain specific preferences regarding intellectual property arrangements?

According to the review criterion “Likely impact and commercial potential” (Section F.2. of the NOFO): *MERC will prioritize research that advances U.S. economic competitiveness and technological leadership, promotes adoption and integration of U.S. technologies in regional markets, creates pathways for technology commercialization and market-driven solutions, and/or establishes intellectual property agreements that favor American interests.*

"Favorable agreements" may depend on the nature of the proposed research, regional market, and private sector partners involved. As noted in Section D of the NOFO, if applicants are invited to submit a full application, specific guidelines for preparing a full application and invitation conditions will be provided. It is reasonable to assume this guidance would clarify “American interests” and the program’s preferences for intellectual property (IP) arrangements in the context of the proposed project.

In general, IP rights are governed by 2 CFR § 200.315 Intangible Property. Under this clause, the U.S. Government receives a royalty-free, nonexclusive, and irrevocable license to IP generated under any award for Federal Purposes. The recipient retains ownership rights to such IP.

Question 13: Would hosting MENA and Israeli students at a U.S. institution be viewed as positive regional collaboration?

The Department cannot determine the competitiveness of a specific concept in advance of submission of a statement of interest (SOI) and submissions will be evaluated competitively against the review criteria in the NOFO.

See the reference within Section B.1. of the NOFO (bottom of page 4) which provides additional information for considering and/or justifying such an engagement: *the addition of an American recipient that does not contribute to commercial outcomes or provide technical expertise that is otherwise unavailable among the other recipients, is discouraged.*

Should a U.S. recipient be included, address how that organization will avoid becoming a buffer to direct cooperation between the regional parties in the “Joint collaborative activities” section of the SOI.

Question 14: Pursuant to Question 13, are stipends, international travel, and related fees for the MENA and Israeli students during any visit to the United States allowable costs?

The costs described may be included in the proposed budget. Appropriate categories (Personnel, Travel, or Other Direct Costs) will depend upon the specific structure proposed. If invited to submit a full application, MERC will provide applicants with additional guidance to ensure costs are categorized appropriately.

Question 15: Are Iranian applicants eligible to serve as PIs?

MERC does not consider the nationality or citizenship of applicants/investigators when evaluating submissions. Eligibility is evaluated based on the consortium of applicant organizations.

Per Section B.1. of the NOFO (page 4), all statements of interest must, at a minimum, include one or more recipient(s) from Israel, plus one or more recipient(s) from an eligible MENA country/territory. Subject to change based on U.S. federal law and country-specific restrictions on funding, in addition to organizations from the United States and Israel, organizations from the following MENA countries/territories are eligible to apply: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and the West Bank and Gaza.

Question 16: Would organizations based in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan be eligible to participate in a limited role, for example as a sub-recipient or consortium member?

Yes, as noted in Section B.1. of the NOFO, limited, well-justified roles may be considered for recipient organizations in countries eligible to receive U.S. foreign assistance that are not explicitly listed among the MENA countries/territories, including Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Question 17: Pursuant to Question 16, could such an organization lead a defined work package?

The Department cannot determine the competitiveness of a specific concept in advance of submission of a SOI and submissions will be evaluated competitively against the review criteria in the NOFO. The role described is not disallowed under the NOFO and would be eligible for review.

Question 18: Should the Principal Investigator be based at the prime institution, or can the lead scientific investigator sit at a sub-recipient while the prime carries administrative and financial responsibility?

The NOFO does not indicate a preference in this regard, nor does the program have a preference. Applicants should structure their proposed project in the way they believe is most responsive to the NOFO and is most effective for implementing their proposed work plan. While the prime recipient is responsible for the overall management of the award, including administrative, financial, and programmatic oversight, the lead scientific investigator may be affiliated with either the prime recipient or a subrecipient, provided the roles and responsibilities of each organization are clearly defined and agreed upon among the consortium members.

Question 19: Can a for-profit Israeli company participate in a consortium?

Yes, as noted within Section B.1. of the NOFO (page 4), corporations and for-profit organizations are among the eligible organization types.

Question 20: Clarify how funding would be provided if the project is selected for award. Would funds be transferred to the prime recipient, which would then be responsible for transferring funds to the sub-recipients, or can MERC issue payments directly to the sub-recipients?

As noted on pages 13-14 of the NOFO, MERC's default award structure is a prime grantee who receives the grant, issues sub-award agreements, and transfers payment to sub-recipients. If the project consortium would require an alternative award management structure, note those constraints under the "Project management" section of the statement of interest (SOI).

In cases where political and/or administrative limitations prevent funds transfers between organizations, MERC currently has the ability to issue direct payments to sub-recipients. It is not pertinent to the submission of the SOI, but should be noted that any recipient receiving direct payments from the U.S. Department of State will need to have completed a full registration in the System for Award Management (see Section E.4., page 16, of the NOFO for details) prior to the issuance of any award.

Question 21: Does MERC require applicants to include commercial activities?

MERC continues to support applied scientific and technical research that enables direct cooperation, strengthens peaceful partnerships, and establishes durable working relationships between individuals, organizations, and communities in Israel and the broader MENA region.

Sections C.1 and D.2 of the NOFO reference applied, actionable research that advances U.S. priorities, including innovation, commercialization, and market adoption of new technologies. Applicants should therefore describe, where relevant, the anticipated economic, commercialization, or market-oriented outcomes of their proposed project.

Question 22: How might a U.S. company contribute to a MERC project?

See Sections B.1 (Eligible Applicants), D.2 (SOI sub-section on "Commercial outcomes"), and F.2 (Review Criteria) of the NOFO for information about the roles U.S. companies may play in MERC projects. Depending on the nature of the research and the stage of the technology, U.S. companies may:

- Co-develop a novel product, service, method, or applied research output;
- Provide an existing U.S. technology for testing, adaptation, or validation in MENA conditions;

- Help identify user requirements, market barriers, regulatory considerations, or distribution channels;
- Provide technical expertise that is not otherwise available within the consortium;
- Support field demonstrations, pilots, or operational testing;
- Advise on commercialization milestones, product-market fit, or scale-up pathways; or
- Help connect research outputs to follow-on investment, licensing, procurement, or deployment.

Question 23: What does MERC mean by “commercialization”?

See Sections C.1 and D.2. of the NOFO. For MERC, commercialization should be consistent with “relevance to priorities of the United States” and “likely impact and commercial potential” such as the process of moving research, technology, tools, data, products, or services toward practical use, adoption, scale, licensing, deployment, or market entry. Commercialization may include but is not limited to:

- Testing whether a technology works in real-world conditions;
- Adapting a U.S. technology to MENA market needs;
- Validating performance with end users;
- Developing a viable business model;
- Identifying customers, users, or buyers;
- Establishing licensing, intellectual property, or distribution pathways;
- Building partnerships that support follow-on investment or adoption;
- Demonstrating that an applied research output can continue beyond the grant period.

A project does not need to complete commercialization during the grant period, but consistent with the guidance in the NOFO, applicants should describe credible steps toward practical use or market adoption where relevant.

Question 24: Can MERC funding help de-risk market entry?

MERC grants may support research activities that help test assumptions, adapt technologies, validate performance, identify viable business models, and build partnerships that make market entry or adoption more feasible.

Applicants should not frame the project only as business development. The proposed work must remain consistent with MERC’s applied scientific and technical research purpose and must meet the eligibility and review criteria in the NOFO.

Question 25: What are acceptable partnership models for U.S. commercial engagement?

See Sections B.1 and F.2 of the NOFO, as well as Question 11. Applicants may propose any partnership structure that is responsive to the NOFO, justified in their application, and supports effective work plan implementation. The following three model are illustrative only and do not

reflect every possible model, nor do they reflect a preference by the program for how projects should be structured.

- Collaborative R&D: A U.S. entity may engage directly in co-developing a novel product, solution, method, or research output.
- U.S. Technology Deployment: A U.S. entity may support the testing, adaptation, demonstration, or validation of an existing U.S. technology in a new environment or use case.
- Strategic Research: A U.S. entity may participate in research on a high-priority topic with significant future commercial potential.

Question 26: Can a project focus on adapting an existing U.S. technology to MENA conditions?

See Sections D.2 and F.2 of the NOFO. Projects may be designed to test, adapt, or validate existing U.S. technologies in MENA operating environments. Examples may include adapting technologies to local environmental conditions, infrastructure constraints, regulatory requirements, user needs, supply chains, cost structures, or distribution channels.

Applicants should explain what is being adapted, why adaptation is needed, who the intended users are, and how the work may support adoption or scale.

----- New since the last update -----

Question 27: How does MERC or the Department of State define a “U.S. company”?

For purposes of this NOFO, a “U.S. company” means a for-profit entity incorporated or otherwise legally organized under the laws of the United States or its territories and conducting substantive business operations in the United States. A U.S.-incorporated subsidiary of a foreign parent may qualify, provided that the proposed MERC activities generate a meaningful benefit to the U.S. entity, including through U.S.-based employment, research and development, manufacturing, technology ownership, exports, investment, or other economic activity. A foreign company with only a U.S. branch or sales presence generally would not qualify as a U.S. company.

Question 28: Can MERC or the Department of State provide a mechanism to protect confidential proprietary information shared via the submission of a SOI?

Individuals involved in the evaluation of MERC grant applications are bound by a confidentiality agreement. However, applicants should not assume that submitting proprietary information to the Department would provide a substitute for appropriate confidentiality, contractual, or other protections. If certain information is not necessary to evaluate the SOI, it may be sufficient to

describe the technology and proposed research at an appropriate level that does not require full disclosure of proprietary information. For example, if preliminary results have been published documenting the effectiveness of a technology, this could be presented in lieu of the specific proprietary information.

Question 29: Would the participation of a funder, investor or venture capital firm from the U.S., Israel, or the MENA region satisfy the NOFO's partner eligibility and geographic requirements?

A funder, investor, or venture capital firm is not categorically excluded from participating in a MERC consortium, as corporations and for-profit organizations are explicitly eligible (Section B.1., page 4, of the NOFO). Their participation could be compelling with regard to MERC's objective focused on accelerating opportunities for trade, investment, and private-sector engagement. However, the proposed role should be substantive and clearly connected to the applied research and commercialization objectives of the project. If the funder, investor, or venture capital firm is proposed to serve as the Israeli or MENA region recipient, applicants should bear in mind that the review criteria specifically evaluate whether recipients have significant intellectual roles, and whether the project includes meaningful joint activities consistent with the program's emphasis on regional cooperation.

Question 30: Can U.S. academic institutions participate in a MERC-funded consortium?

See also Question 13. U.S. academic institutions are eligible recipients; however, applicants should take note of the reference within Section B.1. of the NOFO (bottom of page 4) which reads: *the addition of an American recipient that does not contribute to commercial outcomes or provide technical expertise that is otherwise unavailable among the other recipients, is discouraged*. Applicants should consider whether the U.S. academic institution will contribute expertise or laboratory capacity otherwise unavailable among the Israel-MENA consortium, and/or support connections with the U.S. private sector. If the U.S. academic institution has a track record or unique capabilities related to technology transfer or industry partnerships, this experience could be relevant to highlight in relation to the proposed project's commercial objectives.

Should a U.S. recipient be included, address how that organization will avoid becoming a buffer to direct cooperation between the regional parties in the "Joint collaborative activities" section of the SOI.

Question 31: Must every recipient participate directly in developing a proposed technology, or may a recipient satisfy the MERC program's collaboration requirements through other substantive roles in research design, technology adaptation, field testing, data collection, validation, and/or evaluation?

The NOFO does not require every recipient to participate directly in the technological development or core research and development of the project. Rather, the MERC program expects a collaborative effort among recipient organizations in which all recipients have significant intellectual roles that support the project's objectives, and participate in meaningful joint activities and direct cooperation.

Question 32: If an investigator receives an institutionally supported base salary, must the entire salary associated with the proposed level of effort to be treated as institutional cost share, or may a portion of that salary be requested as Federal Funds?

As noted within Section B.2. of the NOFO (page 5), no minimum or maximum cost share is required for this competition; however, institutions in Israel and other affluent countries are generally expected to provide cost share in order to offset comparatively higher salaries and costs. An investigator with an institutional supported salary may request a portion of their salary as federal funds. An accompanying justification would be welcome at the SOI stage. If invited to submit a full application, the invitation conditions would likely include a request for a justification regarding the need for federal funds to cover the investigator's salary.