DFOP0019227: Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC)

Frequently Asked Questions

Updated August 3, 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).

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

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.