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**MIDDLE EAST REGIONAL COOPERATION (MERC) PROGRAM
Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)**

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SECTION A. PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

I. Background

Following the Camp David accords, a Congressional initiative brought about the Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC) Program to be implemented by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The program began in FY 1979, was included in the Foreign Aid Bill for FY 1981 and continues to be the subject of a Congressional directive in the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Program Appropriations Act (SFOAA) to support cooperative projects of a scientific and technological nature between the United States, Israel, and Middle East countries. Since 1999, MERC has been managed and implemented through an Inter-Agency Agreement between USAID and the U.S. Department of State (DOS).

The MERC Program is funded as assistance to promote scientific cooperation, technology-led development, and capacity building between partners in Israel and eligible countries/territories in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Subject to change based on U.S. federal law and country-specific restrictions on funding, those countries include: Algeria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and the West Bank and Gaza (hereinafter “eligible MENA partners”). Emphasis is given to research and technology subjects of regional importance and relevance to the development in the MENA. Moreover, benefits should target developing, USAID-presence countries in the MENA and resource-limited populations.

Strong, direct cooperation between Israel and the eligible MENA partners is required for proposals receiving funding under the MERC Program. Participation of partners from outside the MENA, including the United States, is not a key feature of the MERC Program, but they may be considered for modest roles in exceptional cases to meet an essential technical need that is not otherwise available among the partners. Applicants must be prepared to provide a well justified case for the involvement of partners from outside the MENA and accept that MERC may not support their participation.

The overall goal of the MERC Program is to enhance research and development cooperation between Israel and its regional neighbors – in support of achieving a comprehensive and lasting Middle East peace.

II. Achievable Objectives

1. Support applied, actionable research that generates results relevant to regional development and empowers communities, organizations, and governments to make evidence-based decisions.
2. Foster the implementation and uptake of research results and innovations, by conducting targeted outreach to public and private sector stakeholders, to improve quality of life, support economic growth, and achieve development impact in the MENA region.
3. Build the science and technology capacity of institutions and the next generation of researchers and leaders in developing countries in the MENA region.
4. Promote direct cooperation between Israel and the MENA region and establish strong working relationships that last beyond the life of the project.

III. Funding Opportunities

The MERC Program funds peer-reviewed, collaborative, scientific research projects on development topics between Israeli partners and the eligible MENA partners. As part of this Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO), MERC is seeking to fund proposals in the following categories:

1. **Applied research grants:** Multi-year, cooperative research projects
2. **Continuation grants:** Funding to extend existing or recently ended MERC awards
3. **Travel and workshop grants:** Support for workshops, meetings, and researcher exchange

Carefully read each section in its entirety to understand the unique requirements of each category. Applicants (both institutions and individual investigators) may submit multiple proposals to one or more categories. Proposals to the MERC Program are not restricted to a particular technical sector; however, under this current NOFO, the program has a special interest in proposals aligned with supporting Negev Forum priorities (see SECTION A, PART IV below).

This NOFO does not constitute an award or commitment on the part of the U.S. government to make any awards, nor does it commit the U.S. government to pay for costs incurred in the preparation and submission of a proposal.

A. Applied Research Grants

The MERC Program seeks pre-proposals pertaining to applied research and technology development within the broad areas of the natural, physical, and social sciences and engineering. Pre-proposals under this category should present collaborative applied research projects on topics of development relevance to the MENA region. Pre-proposals should relate to regional problems that benefit from cross-border cooperation. Examples of the types of development impacts MERC aims to achieve include but are not limited to: economic growth that increases incomes of the disadvantaged, improved environmental management, increased sustainable food production, improved water conservation and efficient use, and enhanced delivery of health services through better treatments or health management strategies.

As MERC uses the scientific peer review process to evaluate full proposals, avoid topics that are not traditionally subject to peer review. Investigators are encouraged to employ mixed-methods research, economic evaluations, and the use of digital technologies in their work where appropriate.

MERC places a strong emphasis on training, outreach, and dissemination of research results, with the goal of impacting management decisions, scientific capacity building, economic growth, youth engagement, private sector involvement, and policy-making in the MENA region. In support of direct regional cooperation, capacity building, and implementation of research outcomes, travel of grantees within the MENA region is expected. Additional allowable cost categories are discussed in SECTION I. BUDGET GUIDANCE, but generally include support for personnel, equipment, materials and supplies, modest improvements to existing facilities, communications and website hosting, publications, collaboration and training-related materials, venue rental, transportation, and hospitality, and tools for the dissemination of results are supported as they directly relate to the proposal's objectives.

The consortium of applicants must at a minimum be bi-lateral (one Israeli institution and one institution from among the eligible MENA partners) but may include partners from multiple institutions and/or multiple eligible MENA countries/territories.

The following activities and costs are **NOT ALLOWED** under this announcement category:

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- Basic research
- Activities that appear partisan or that support individual or party electoral campaigns
- Projects which solely or predominantly represent the development of physical infrastructures, core support for organizations, or delivery of services, including:
 - Construction of laboratories or clinics
 - Delivery of health services
 - Delivery of educational services
 - Social development programs
 - Establishment of private enterprises and projects of a commercial or profit-making nature
- Projects lacking an innovative approach, or primarily constitute:
 - Planning studies or case studies
 - Operations research, surveys, evaluations, and baseline data collection
 - Routine geographical mapping
 - Literature reviews
 - Social welfare projects
- Paying to complete activities begun with other (non-MERC) funds
- One-time events, such as stand-alone conferences and one-off round tables
- Entertainment costs (e.g., recreational activities, ceremonies, galas, alcoholic beverages)

Pre-proposals that include any of these activities or costs may not be advanced for review and may be deemed ineligible for funding under this announcement.

Estimated Award Ceiling: \$1,000,000

Estimated Award Floor: None

Cost-Sharing or Matching: No minimum or maximum percentage is required for this competition; however, institutions in Israel and other affluent countries should provide cost share in order to offset comparatively higher salaries and costs. MERC funds should be preferentially targeted to ensure the full participation of the students and research staff in participating countries that are less economically advantaged.

Estimated Length of Project: 2 to 5 years

Applicants with complex, multi-partner concepts that justify a proposal budget in excess of \$1,000,000 may present a “phased” work plan with well-defined deliverables and outcomes at the conclusion of each phase. This combined work plan and budget may be in excess of \$1,000,000 over several years, but each individual phase should not be in excess of \$1,000,000. The pre-proposal should present the first phase, but briefly describe the objectives and anticipated outcomes of the subsequent phase(s). Each subsequent phase may be subject to peer review and will be evaluated and considered for funding as a separate proposal.

MERC anticipates inviting approximately 20 pre-proposals from this category to submit full proposals.

Applicants under this category are required only to submit a pre-proposal as described in SECTION C. If a full proposal is invited, guidelines for preparing the full proposal and specific invitation conditions will be provided to the applicants.

Requests for funding to extend beyond the initial budget period will be entertained on the basis of a successful proposal for a Continuation Grant (next section).

B. Continuation Grants

Applicants with current or recently ended MERC awards may submit proposals to be evaluated as “continuation grants,” skipping the scientific peer review process. Continuation grants provide support for the implementation, commercialization, broader dissemination, or uptake of project results from MERC-supported research. Depending on the type of project and results obtained, MERC would favor the integration of private sector partnerships, a focus on end-user adoption of technology, or tailoring outcomes to be useful to regulators in government agencies.

This option can also be used to propose the incorporation of an additional country partner to a current award, or to propose an additional objective(s) be added to a current award as supported by preliminary findings.

Concepts proposing new objectives or methodologies that were not previously subject to scientific peer review may be required to submit a new pre-proposal (PART A). Applicants are strongly encouraged to consult with MERC prior to submission to ensure proposals are suitable for consideration for continuation funding.

MERC will review each grantee’s progress in meeting grant requirements, including timely submission of required reports, and compliance with all terms and conditions of the award; timely submission of a request for continuation funding; the availability of funds; and an evaluation of whether continued funding is in the best interest of the MERC Program.

The same activities and costs disallowed under the Applied Research Grants category are also disallowed under this announcement category.

Estimated Award Ceiling: \$500,000

Estimated Award Floor: None

Cost-Sharing or Matching: No minimum or maximum percentage is required for this competition; however, institutions in Israel and other affluent countries should provide cost share in order to offset comparatively higher salaries and costs. MERC funds should be preferentially targeted to ensure the full participation of the students and research staff in participating countries that are less economically advantaged.

Estimated Length of Project: 1 to 3 years

C. Travel and Workshop Grants

Proposals to support joint cooperative workshops, meetings, or exchange of researchers may be considered under this category. MERC acknowledges the relatively limited opportunities for scientific exchange between scientists from Israel and the MENA region and seeks to support forums that advance dialogue on regional scientific issues, develop new partnerships, or deliver training on a topic relevant to regional development. Preference will be given to proposals that cite the development of new pre-proposals to the MERC program as a key outcome, engage students and early career researchers, meaningfully engage policymakers and stakeholders, and are organized in the Middle East region.

It is strongly preferred that applicants propose one prime recipient/grantee and no sub-recipients under this

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category, and that the prime organize a collaborative activity and directly cover the associated costs for participants.

Neither USAID nor the U.S. Department of State will assist organizers or participants in obtaining travel documents or visas.

Examples of potential activities that would be considered under this category include:

- A multi-day training program focused on bringing together early career researchers to develop specific skills or know-how related to a regional development priority
- A meeting of stakeholders to discuss research gaps in a particular sector with relevance to regional development
- A workshop of researchers and stakeholders, including private sector partners, with shared interests to identify potential areas for cross-border scientific cooperation
- An Israeli institution hosting a visiting researcher from an eligible MENA partner (or vice versa) for a couple of months to learn a new technique and develop a research partnership

Estimated Award Ceiling: \$100,000

Estimated Award Floor: None

Cost-Sharing or Matching: No minimum or maximum percentage is required for this competition; however, institutions in Israel and other affluent countries should provide cost share in order to offset comparatively higher salaries and costs. MERC funds should be preferentially targeted to ensure the full participation of the students and research staff in participating countries that are less economically advantaged.

Estimated Length of Project: One activity, event, or exchange to be completed within one year of the award.

MERC anticipates advancing approximately 3 proposals from this category for funding consideration.

VI. Special Call: Proposals Supporting Negev Forum Priorities

The Negev Summit was a historic meeting convened in March 2022 that brought together U.S. Secretary of State Blinken and foreign ministers from Israel, Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco and UAE. As a follow-on to the summit, senior diplomats from the United States, Israel, UAE, Egypt, Morocco, and Bahrain met in June 2022 to move forward with the Negev Forum, a newly established framework for cooperation in the region as countries in the Middle East and North Africa normalize relations with Israel. Members agreed to focus on cooperation efforts through six working groups: water and food security, clean energy, tourism, health, education and co-existence, and regional security.

As part of this NOFO, MERC aims to promote partnerships between Negev Forum countries or other key partners in regional integration. Negev Forum countries include Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, and UAE. Key partners in regional integration include Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza, and Saudi Arabia.

Applicants who wish to respond to this special call may apply for an **applied research grant, continuation grant, or travel and workshop grant** (as described above), should address one of the following thematic areas, and consider the priority topics listed:

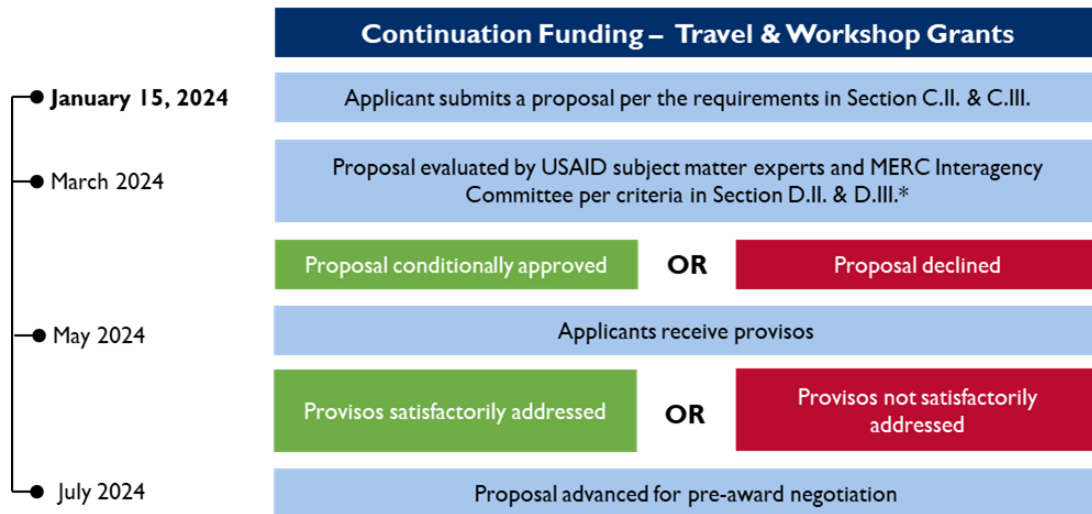
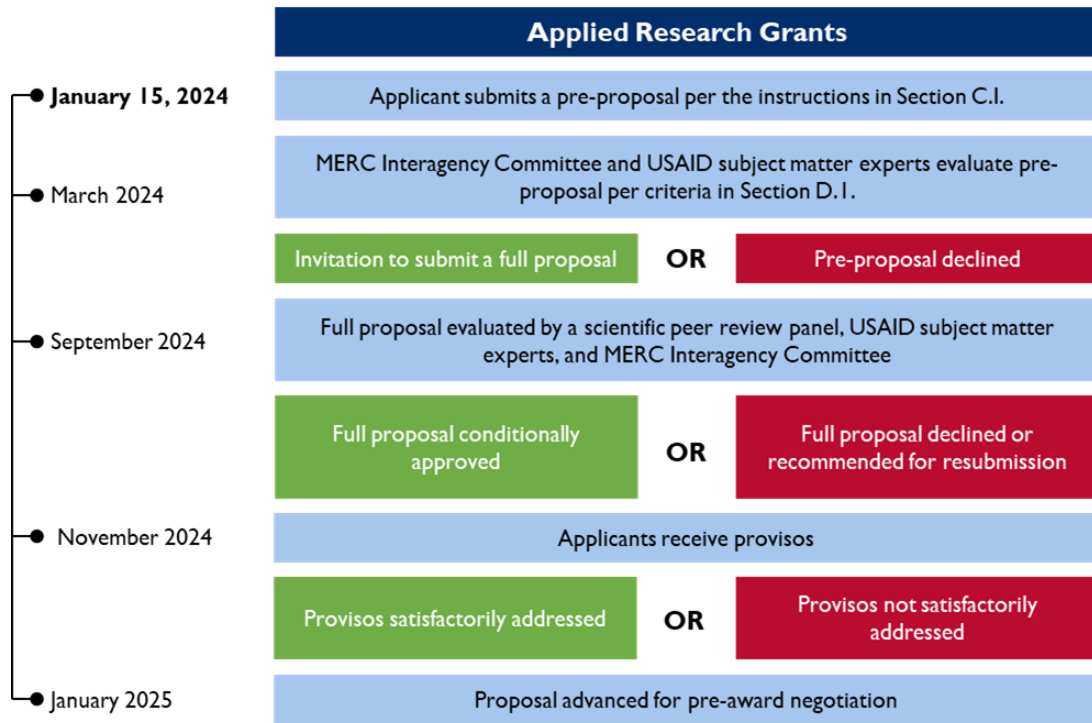
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- **Water and food security:** Proposals focused on water treatment, reuse, management, quality, and affordability; sustainable agriculture and fisheries; plant and animal protection; and food storage and supply chain continuity.
- **Clean energy:** Proposals that would accelerate the clean energy transition in the region with a specific focus on smart grids and regionally interconnectivity.
- **Tourism:** Proposals to build tourism operator capacity and/or to support sustainable eco-tourism.
- **Health:** Proposals focused on the prevention, treatment, and management of diabetes.
- **Education and coexistence:** Proposals with special attention to bolstering academic collaboration and/or meaningfully engaging regional populations from different backgrounds.

This special call for proposals should not discourage applicants from submitting proposals with other eligible partners and/or on any other topic within the natural, physical, and social sciences and engineering.

Applicants who believe their proposal is responsive to this special call should include “Negev Forum” as a keyword. (No penalty will apply to proposals deemed by MERC to not be responsive to the special call.)

V. Overall Process and Notional Timeline



* Proposals may be sent for external evaluation by peer reviewers if the technical content cannot be adequately assessed by USAID

[END OF SECTION A]

SECTION B. ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

Proposals will be screened to determine whether they meet the program eligibility requirements detailed below. Proposals that do not demonstrate that they meet all eligibility requirements described below may not be advanced for review and may be deemed ineligible for funding under this announcement. Proposals cannot be revised or amended once the competition deadline has passed.

Please contact merc@usaid.gov with questions about eligibility.

I. Eligible Applicants

Subject to change based on U.S. federal law and country-specific restrictions on funding, in addition to Israel the following countries/territories are eligible to apply as MENA partners: Algeria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and the West Bank and Gaza. Partners may come from academic, private sector, non-governmental, or governmental institutions eligible to receive U.S. foreign assistance.

A. Applied Research Grants

All proposals **must include at least one Israeli partner and one eligible MENA partner**. Only proposals developed jointly by investigators from the partner institutions are accepted. Proposals involving three or more partners are also allowed and encouraged. The proposal may be submitted by any party in the collaboration.

MERC projects involving Israel and another relatively affluent MENA country (i.e., Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, or the United Arab Emirates) **must include a developing country** from the eligible MENA countries/territories (i.e., Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, and the West Bank and Gaza) in the region as a partner and/or a beneficiary of the research outcomes. Affluent countries must adhere to budgetary restrictions, such as cost-sharing salaries, maintain the spirit of regional cooperation opposed to primarily engaging foreign expatriates, and target benefits and outcomes of the project to developing, USAID-presence countries in the MENA region and resource-limited populations. Satellite or portal campuses of foreign (e.g., U.S., Indian) institutions are not considered eligible MENA partners.

Participation of partners from outside the MENA, including the United States, is not a key feature of the MERC Program, but they may be considered for modest roles in exceptional cases to meet an essential technical need that is not otherwise available among the partners. Applicants must be prepared to provide a well justified case for participation of partners from outside the MENA and accept that MERC may not support their participation. The use of non-regional partners to lead or administer the overall project is discouraged.

B. Continuation Grants

Same as above: A. Applied Research Grants.

C. Travel and Workshop Grants

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To simplify the award management, it is strongly preferred that applicants to the Travel and Workshop Grants category propose one prime recipient/grantee from Israel or one of the eligible MENA partners, and no sub-recipients. The prime must propose an activity involving participants from Israel and one or more of the eligible MENA partners.

II. Equitable Participation, Benefit, and Gender Integration

MERC is committed to an anti-discrimination policy in all of its programs and activities. MERC welcomes proposals irrespective of an applicant's race, ethnicity, color, creed, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, or disability, and encourages proposals from organizations working with underserved communities, including women, people with disabilities, and youth.

Furthermore, research must meet standards of equity in access to research funds, participation in research, benefits from research findings, and safety in research efforts. Issues of gender equity are of special concern. Assessment of equity in research programs will also include concern for ethnic and racial minorities and other disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.

Applicants are encouraged to address any potential biases inherent in their proposal. Consider any differences in how women, men, youth, those with disabilities, or other minority groups might engage with or benefit from a technology, product, or protocol under development, or how they might benefit or equitably participate in research, training, or outreach activities.

III. Role of the Prime Applicant

Under the Applied Research Grants and Continuation Grants category, MERC's preferred structure is a prime recipient who receives the grant, issues sub-award agreements to sub-recipients, and transfers payments to sub-recipients.

Under the Travel and Workshop Grants category, MERC's preferred structure is one prime recipient/grantee from Israel or one of the eligible MENA partners, and no sub-recipients. The prime must propose an activity involving participants from Israel and one or more of the eligible MENA partners.

If the consortium of partners involved in the proposal requires an alternative award management structure, briefly describe those constraints within the proposal. Applicants with questions about allowable award structures are encouraged to contact merc@usaid.gov.

IV. Previously Declined Proposals

A previously declined proposal may be resubmitted, but only after it has undergone substantial revision. MERC offers consultation sessions for declined pre-proposals and provides detailed review packages for declined full proposals. Applicants planning to re-submit a previously declined concept should use this information and the guidelines herein to submit a substantially revised proposal. MERC will treat this proposal as a new submission. Resubmitted proposals that have not been substantially revised may be declined without review. Applicants with questions about resubmitting previously declined proposals are encouraged to contact merc@usaid.gov.

[END OF SECTION B]

SECTION C. PROPOSAL INSTRUCTIONS

Proposals that do not follow the format described in the subsequent sub-sections, or meet the eligibility requirements for applicants described in SECTION B, or are incomplete, may be declined without review.

I. Applied Research Grants

A. Pre-Proposal Format and Requirements

The main body of the pre-proposal (Parts 1-10, below) must be no more than 6 pages (U.S. Letter, 8.5 x 11 inches) with one-inch margins, single-spaced, using a full-size font (e.g., 12 pt Times New Roman). All proposals must be prepared in English, in the following format, and contain each of the following elements. Additional pages (such as letters of support) may be included, but any pages beyond the 6-page limit may not be evaluated or considered as part of the pre-proposal. Do not include biographical data sheets, CVs or resumes, publications, or general institutional information such as brochures. All pre-proposals must stand on their own merit. References may be included as footnotes or on an additional page.

The pre-proposal and any additional pages must be saved as one PDF document.

Investigators from all participating institutions must collaborate in writing the pre-proposal. Pre-proposals are not binding agreements; therefore, signatures from institutional officials are not required at the pre-proposal stage. Do not include the names of investigators/participants unless they were active participants in preparing the pre-proposal and have given their permission.

1. **Title:** Provide a technical, concise, descriptive title.

2. **Contact information:**

- a. **Investigators:** List the full name (**first and LAST name** in bold font using all uppercase letters for surname only), title, affiliation, full mailing address, telephone number, and e-mail address of every investigator. Clearly identify the principal investigator at the submitting institution (i.e., prime applicant) to whom all correspondence should be addressed. If more than one investigator is listed at the other cooperating institution(s), identify the primary point of contact.
- b. **Institutional administrative official:** Provide the full name (**first and LAST name** in bold font using all uppercase letters for surname only), title, affiliation, full mailing address, telephone number, and e-mail address of the institutional official at the submitting institution who is authorized to negotiate a legal agreement on behalf of the prime institution.

3. **Keywords:** List 3 to 5 technical keywords or phrases that capture the scope of the pre-proposal. Single keywords or phrases up to 4 words are acceptable. Applicants who believe their proposal is responsive to the Special Call for Proposals (SECTION A. IV.) should include “Negev Forum” as a keyword.

4. **Overall aim, objectives, and hypotheses:** State the overall aim of the project in one sentence or short paragraph. State the specific technical objectives (typically 3 or 4 objectives presented as a short list). The objectives should each be instrumental to achieving the overall aim of the project. For each objective, explicitly articulate the hypothesis to be tested. Additional non-technical objectives related to outreach, dissemination, capacity building, etc. may be included without an associated hypothesis.

5. **Rationale and background:** (approx. 1 page) Address each of the following sub-sections:

- a. **Relevance to regional development:** Clearly identify the development challenge addressed by the proposed research. Discuss the significance of the proposed topic and how it is relevant to

development in the MENA region, and specifically developing or USAID-presence countries in the MENA region and resource-limited populations. As relevant, quantify the size or magnitude of the problem in terms of affected population, land area, resource availability, yields, etc.

- b. **Technical background:** Provide a brief summary of earlier studies, the technical basis and starting point for the work proposed, preliminary data if available, and citations of key literature references, as appropriate. This summary should also clarify why the proposed research is scientifically important.
- c. **Knowledge gap and research novelty:** Explain how the current knowledge falls short of addressing the identified development challenge, and how the proposed work aims to bridge that gap. Provide a brief description of what is new or innovative about the proposed activity, including how it represents a significant departure from previous or ongoing work in the sector and/or region. As applicable, discuss both the novelty of the scientific contribution and the approach to implementation.

6. **Technical work plan:** (approx. 1 to 2 pages) Provide a detailed description of the proposed work. In separate work packages outline the specific technical activities, experimental design proposed, and associated data analysis. Relate each work package to the underlying objective(s) and scientific hypotheses. Be specific about the intended experiments, their design, data analysis, and how they relate to the research question. Specify the duration of each work package and the overall project. Describe the anticipated division of labor, capacity and capabilities, and substantive contributions of the partner institutions and investigators.

Tip: The pre-proposal will be reviewed by both non-technical staff (those without a scientific background) and technical staff (those with a scientific background in the subject field). Parts 4-6, in particular, should be presented such that the value of the proposed research and approach can be appreciated by a general audience, but specific enough to provide technical reviewers with sufficient detail to appreciate the technical merit.

7. **Expected benefits:** (approx. ½ to 1 page) Address each of the following sub-sections:

- a. **Expected development outcomes:** State the expected technical and development outcomes, including new scientific knowledge, information, technologies, or management practices.
- b. **Stakeholder engagement:** Identify the primary stakeholders and intended beneficiaries of the outcomes. Describe plans (e.g., format, frequency) to engage with the identified stakeholders and beneficiaries and how the impact of these interactions would be assessed. Explicitly address how research findings will support gender empowerment and/or youth engagement, involve the private sector, inform policy-making, and/or promote regional development.
- c. **Institutional capacity building:** Indicate how the capacity of institutions in the participating developing countries would be enhanced by the project, such as through provision of equipment, enhancement of technical capabilities, or improvement in project management or decision-making capacity.

Tip: End-users of research products are frequently involved from the beginning of the project and are engaged via outreach presentations, demonstration days, etc.

8. **Joint collaborative activities:** (approx. ½ page) Present evidence that the proposed project is intended as a true intellectual partnership. Provide a brief, specific description of the planned interactions and capacity building activities between Israeli and MENA region partners, including an estimate of the frequency and duration of activities. Examples of joint collaborative activities include coordination

meetings, direct exchanges of personnel (e.g., scientists in residence, training of students from other countries), joint field data collection, joint publications with authors from both/all partner countries/territories, and joint conferences and workshops in the region. Describe the anticipated topics to be covered as part of any planned student exchange, training, conferences, and workshops. Joint activities should be planned in the partner countries/territories. If a U.S. partner or other non-regional partner is involved in the project, specifically address how that partner will avoid becoming a buffer to direct cooperation between the regional parties.

Tip: Partners under MERC awards are expected to conduct in-person coordination meetings at least once per year. Successful applicants generally also host joint training sessions on technical topics, and/or support student exchange.

9. Project management and personnel: (approx. ½ page) Address both of the following sub-sections. If applicants propose the involvement of any partners not included in the list of eligible MENA partners, such as the U.S., under each sub-section summarize the critical importance of that partner, including the technical expertise they provide that is both essential to the success of the project and otherwise unavailable.

- a. **Project management:** Identify which single institution would serve as the prime grantee and be responsible for technical and financial reporting. 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 consortium of partners involved in the project would require an alternative award management structure, note those constraints here. Applicants with questions about award structure are encouraged to reach out to MERC. Describe organizational and operational plans for managing the collaboration financially and programmatically. Include project meetings, technical and management committees, etc., if applicable.
- b. **Personnel:** Justify how the applicants’ expertise uniquely qualifies them to undertake the proposed work. Clearly state the expected engagement, roles, and tasks for early career researchers and graduate students. If applicable, note any relevant past cooperation between the applicant investigators.

10. Budget: (approx. ½ page) A budget template and more detailed budget guidelines will be provided to applicants invited to submit a full proposal. At this stage, applicants should prepare a budget based on realistic anticipated costs associated with the proposed work plan. The budget must be prepared in U.S. dollars, indicating projected expenses in the budget categories listed below, entering the amounts in a table like the example provided below. Carefully review SECTION I. BUDGET GUIDANCE for additional details regarding allowable costs and how to prepare the budget table. Basic guidance follows:

- **Personnel:** List each individual salary or personnel cost on a separate line, using as many lines as necessary.
- **Equipment, and Materials and Supplies:** Estimate materials costs, such as reagents and other expendables, on a separate line from equipment. Equipment is defined as any individual item over \$5,000. Items under \$5,000 should be included under materials. At the full proposal stage, applicants will be required to provide price quotes for requested equipment.
- **Indirect costs:** Indirect costs (i.e., overhead) must be calculated in accordance with the guidance in SECTION I.
- Use a separate single column for each participating institution, and estimate any cost share that might be expected from each institution.
- Projects are not required to spend in every category.
- At the bottom of the budget table, include total expense (sum) by institution and by country, the overall total project cost to MERC, and specify the duration of the project (number of years).

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- In a short footnote, briefly justify any requested equipment, describe the types of expenses under “Other direct costs,” and clarify any other line items that may not be intuitive from the pre-proposal.

Example budget table

	Institute 1		Institute 2		Sum	
	USAID	Cost Share	USAID	Cost Share	USAID	Cost Share
Personnel						
Position 1 (% effort, rate)						
Position 2 (% effort, rate)						
Equipment						
Equipment item 1						
Equipment item 2						
Materials and supplies						
Materials type 1						
Materials type 2						
Travel						
International travel						
Domestic travel						
Other direct costs						
Total direct costs						
Indirect costs						
Totals (# of years)						

If the MERC Committee recommends to invite a full proposal from the applicants, guidelines for preparing a full proposal and specific invitation conditions will be provided to the applicants.

B. Required Documents

Applicants under this category are only required to submit a 6-page pre-proposal as described above.

If the applicants are invited to submit a full proposal, guidelines for preparing a full proposal and specific invitation conditions will be provided. The full proposal will detail and expand upon the concept outlined in the pre-proposal and require signatures from the applicants and authorizing officials at the applicant institutions. As a requirement of the full proposal, applicant organizations must have a Unique Entity Identifier (UEI) number, and an active account with the System for Award Management (SAM) (See

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SECTION F, Part III. Federal Registrations for more details). Prime applicants will also need to provide a completed SF-424 as part of the full proposal.

Pre-proposals for applied research grants need not include their UEI, proof of active SAM registration, signatures of the applicants or authorizing officials, nor provide a completed SF-424.

C. Submitting the Pre-Proposal

Applicants must submit pre-proposals in the required format as an email attachment to **merc@usaid.gov** by **11:59pm EST on January 15, 2024** with the email subject “**MERC Applied Research Grant Pre-Proposal - LAST NAME**” including the last name of the principal investigator. MERC will acknowledge receipt of pre-proposals by email. Hard copies are not accepted.

II. Continuation Grants

A. Proposal Format and Requirements

The main body of the proposal (Parts 1-14, below) should be approximately 10 pages (U.S. Letter, 8.5 x 11 inches) with one-inch margins, single spaced, using a full-size font (e.g., 12 pt Times New Roman). All proposals must be prepared in English, in the following format, and contain each of the following elements. Letters of support, CVs of newly added investigators, and other supporting documentation should be included as appendices and are not counted as part of the 10-page estimate. References may be included as footnotes or on an additional page.

The entire proposal and appendices must be saved as one PDF document.

Investigators from all participating institutions must collaborate in writing the proposal. Proposals are not binding agreements; however, to demonstrate commitment to the concept applicants are required to include a signature page (Part 13).

1. **Title:** Provide a concise, descriptive title for the proposed event or activity.
2. **Contact information:**
 - a. **Investigators:** List the full name (**first and LAST name** in bold font using all uppercase letters for surname only), title, affiliation, full mailing address, telephone number, and e-mail address of every investigator. Clearly identify the primary investigator at the submitting institution to whom all correspondence should be addressed. If more than one investigator is listed at the other cooperating institution(s), identify the primary point of contact.
 - b. **Institutional administrative officials:** Provide the full name (**first and LAST name** in bold font using all uppercase letters for surname only), title, affiliation, full mailing address, telephone number, and e-mail address of the officials at each investigator’s institution authorized to negotiate a legal agreement for that institution or organization.
3. **Keywords:** List 3 to 5 technical keywords or phrases that capture the scope of the pre-proposal. Single keywords or phrases up to 4 words are acceptable. Applicants who believe their proposal is responsive to the Special Call for Proposals (SECTION A. IV.) should include “Negev Forum” as a keyword.
4. **Technical summary:** (½ page) Provide a brief technical summary of the project, similar to the abstract for a scientific paper or meeting, structured per the following outline. Summarize each of the following components in 1-2 sentences. Ensure that it is concise yet accurately summarizes the proposed work.
 - a. **Background:** An overview of the challenge the research addresses.
 - b. **Aims:** The aim and technical objectives of the project.
 - c. **Methodology:** The approach to be taken to address the project’s objectives.
 - d. **Expected outcomes:** The anticipated deliverables and/or potential scientific and development benefits of the research.

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- e. **Implementation:** Indicate how the results will be put into practice through stakeholder engagement, trainings, workshops, technology transfer, demonstration sites, etc.

5. Overall aim, objectives, and hypotheses: State the overall aim of the project in one sentence or short paragraph. State the specific technical objectives (typically 3 or 4 objectives presented as a short list). The objectives should each be instrumental to achieving the overall aim of the project. For each objective, explicitly articulate the hypothesis to be tested. Additional non-technical objectives related to outreach, dissemination, capacity building, etc. may be included without an associated hypothesis.

6. Summary of prior work: (½ page) Summarize earlier studies, the technical basis and starting point for the work proposed, preliminary data if available, and citations of a few key literature references, as appropriate. Describe the outcomes under the current or recently ended MERC award that established the basis for this proposal.

7. Technical work plan: (approx. 3 to 5 pages) Provide a detailed description of the proposed work, outlining the specific technical activities and the experimental design proposed, and the associated data analysis in separate work packages. Relate each work package to the underlying objective(s) and scientific hypotheses. Be specific about the intended experiments, their design, data analysis, and how they relate to the research question. Specify the duration of each work package and the overall project. Describe the anticipated division of labor, capacity and capabilities, and substantive contributions of the partner institutions and investigators. Also, include the following:

- a. **Technical contingencies:** Potential points of failure in the work plan and associated risk mitigation measures or alternatives.
- b. **Time chart:** In a table, indicate the research milestones, project meetings, training/exchanges, outreach events.
- c. **Location information:** Present as a map or chart, for any field plots or sampling locations involved in the proposal research.
- d. **Data management plan:** Describe the kinds of data the project will generate, how data and/or research products will be made available to the public, industry, and scientific community, and any ethical or privacy issues associated with sharing generated data.

8. Management and cooperation (approx. 2 to 3 pages)

- a. **Project management:** Clarify whether the overall management structure differs from the current or recently ended MERC award and identify which single institution would serve as the prime grantee and be responsible for technical and financial reporting. (Note: It is generally preferred to maintain the prime institution from any current MERC award.)
- b. **Joint activities:** Provide a table specifying the planned interactions and capacity building activities between Israeli and MENA region partners, including their timing within the project, duration, location(s), what would occur, and number and composition of participants to the extent they can be determined at this time. Examples of joint collaborative activities include coordination meetings, direct exchanges of personnel (e.g., scientists in residence, training of students from other countries), joint field data collection, joint publications with authors from both/all partner countries/territories, and joint conferences and workshops in the region. Describe the anticipated topics to be covered as part of any planned student exchange, training, conferences, and workshops. Activities should be planned in one of the partner countries.
- c. **Facilities:** Describe the institutional facilities and resources available for the proposed research. Demonstrate that the required facilities are indeed available to accomplish the specified functions, including equipment currently in use that will be used to accomplish the goals of the proposed project. Justify the acquisition of any additional facilities (e.g., land leasing, rental space) if requested in the budget.

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- d. **Staff:** Indicate whether there are changes to the cooperating investigators. Specify the area of expertise and qualifications of any new personnel. Clearly state the expected engagement, roles, and tasks for early career researchers and graduate students in the project.

9. **Expected benefits:** (approx. ½ page) Address each of the following sub-sections:

- a. **Expected development outcomes:** State the expected technical and development outcomes, including new scientific knowledge, information, technologies, or management practices.
- b. **Stakeholder engagement:** Identify the primary stakeholders and intended beneficiaries of the outcomes. Describe plans (e.g., format, frequency) to engage with the identified stakeholders and beneficiaries and how the impact of these interactions would be assessed. Explicitly address how research findings will support gender empowerment and/or youth engagement, involve the private sector, inform policy-making, and/or promote regional development.
- c. **Institutional capacity building:** Indicate how the capacity of institutions in the participating developing countries would be enhanced by the project, such as through provision of equipment, enhancement of technical capabilities, or improvement in project management or decision-making capacity.

10. **Special concerns analysis:** (approx. ½ page) Revisit the “Special Concerns Analysis” from the current or recently ended award and update the narrative as appropriate for this additional proposed work plan. Specifically address any potential gender-related biases (e.g., equitable participation, benefit from the outcomes) inherent in the planned activity. Consider any difference in how women, men, youth, those with disabilities, or other minority groups might engage with, benefit from, or equitably participate in the activity.

11. **Budget:** (1 to 2 pages) Provide a budget table for each year of the proposed project and a summary budget table with the life-of-project budget totals. Screenshots of MS Excel Budget Template tables (see below in Part B) are appropriate to insert in this section, but the images must be legible.

12. **Budget justification:** (1 page) A narrative must explain how the individual items of the budget were derived and calculated. Explain the basis of the proposed costs for each line item and confirm adherence with the policies described in SECTION I. BUDGET GUIDANCE. Take great care to ensure that the budget justification matches the amounts listed in the budget spreadsheet and that those costs also match the details of the work plan and joint activities described in the proposal.

13. **NCAGE and SAM registration:** The submitting institution (i.e., the prime recipient/grantee) must provide both their NCAGE code and Unique Entity Identification (UEI) from SAM.gov with their proposal package. See SECTION F, Part III. Federal Registrations for more information. Sub-recipients/awardees are not required to have a UEI number prior to the submission of a proposal but must have one prior to a sub-award being issued.

14. **Signature page:** Include a signature page as indicated below.

- a. **Investigators’ signatures:** Provide signatures of the primary investigator and co-investigators from each of the cooperating institutions, affirming the following declaration:
The undersigned affirm that this proposal represents their individual and collective original work, and that they individually and collectively agree to participate in the activity as described if funded.
- b. **Authorizing signatures:** Provide signatures of authorized officials from the institution designated to be the prime grantee, and from each institution that is proposed to receive a sub-grant, affirming the following declaration:
Each of the undersigned affirms that this proposal represents an authorized submission of the institution that the undersigned represents, that it has been prepared using the appropriate

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accounting and other practices of that institution, and that the institution intends to devote the specified staff, facilities, and financial resources to the project if funded.

B. Required Documents

Proposal: As described above in Part A and saved as a PDF. If provisionally approved, MERC may request revisions, or additional details or clarification to the proposal.

Budget: Review SECTION I. BUDGET GUIDANCE. Applicants should use the template provided in APPENDIX B (“Continuation” tabs) to prepare a budget based on realistic anticipated costs associated with the proposed work plan. Submit as a MS Excel file.

SF-424: The submitting institution must provide the completed Application for Federal Assistance (SF-424). Instructions relevant to MERC applicants are included in APPENDIX A. A fillable PDF can be downloaded here: <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/forms/sf-424-family.html>

C. Submitting the Proposal

Submit the required documents in one email with attachments to merc@usaid.gov by **11:59pm EST on January 15, 2024** with the email subject “**MERC Continuation Grant Proposal - LAST NAME**” including the last name of the principal investigator. MERC will acknowledge receipt of proposals by email. Hard copies are not accepted.

III. Travel and Workshop Grants

A. Proposal Format and Requirements

The main body of the proposal (Parts 1-14, below) must be no more than 6 pages (U.S. Letter, 8.5 x 11 inches) with one-inch margins, single-spaced, using a full-size font (e.g., 12 pt Times New Roman). All proposals must be prepared in English, in the following format, and contain each of the following elements. Additional pages (such as letters of support, biographies of organizers or key individuals, or relevant workshop/training materials) may be included, but any pages beyond the 6-page limit may not be evaluated by the review committee or considered as part of the proposal. References may be included as footnotes or on an additional page.

This category is intended only for one-time events, activities, or exchanges. Applicants with more complex, multi-year concepts for research cooperation should consider applying under the Applied Research Grant category.

The following three definitions apply to this category:

- **Organizers** include individuals employed by the submitting institution who have a substantial role in coordinating and facilitating the activity.
- **Consultants** include individuals not employed by the submitting institution who have a substantial role in coordinating and facilitating the activity.
- **Participants** include all other attendees.

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Investigators from submitting institutions must collaborate in writing the proposal. Proposals are not binding agreements; however, to demonstrate commitment to the concept applicants are required to include a signature page (Part 14).

1. **Title:** Provide a concise, descriptive title for the proposed event or activity.

2. **Contact information:**

- a. **Organizers and consultants:** List the full name (**first and LAST name** in bold font using all uppercase letters for surname only), title, affiliation, full mailing address, telephone number, and e-mail address of every organizer and consultant. Clearly identify the primary organizer at the submitting institution to whom all correspondence should be addressed.
- b. **Institutional administrative official:** Provide the full name (**first and LAST name** in bold font using all uppercase letters for surname only), title, affiliation, full mailing address, telephone number, and e-mail address of the official at the submitting institution authorized to negotiate a legal agreement for that institution or organization.

3. **Keywords:** List 3 to 5 technical keywords or phrases that capture the scope of the pre-proposal. Single keywords or phrases up to 4 words are acceptable. Applicants who believe their proposal is responsive to the Special Call for Proposals (SECTION A. IV.) should include “Negev Forum” as a keyword.

4. **Abstract:** (3 or 4 sentences) Provide a general, summary description of the activity’s overall aims and scope. Specify whether the proposal is for a workshop, meeting, training, or a researcher exchange. Summarize the activity’s rationale, anticipated participants, and anticipated outcomes (paraphrasing the subsequent sections below).

5. **Rationale:** (approx. ¼ to ½ page) Define the overall aim and specific objectives. Describe the current status of the research on the topic of focus, justify why there is a need for regional cooperation on this issue, and discuss how the topic relates to development in the MENA region.

6. **Agenda:** (approx. ½ to 1 page) Provide an agenda for the activity, identifying the duration of the activity, topics to be covered, location, and facilities to be used. For workshops, short training sessions, or similar format events, provide a notional day-by-day agenda. Indicate whether the activity is dependent upon occurring on a specific date or in coordination with another event. Preference is given to applicants seeking support for travel and activities within Israel and the eligible MENA countries/territories.

7. **Management and personnel:** (approx. ½ page) Address both of the following sub-sections.

- a. **Project management:** Identify which single institution would serve as the prime grantee and be responsible for technical and financial reporting. MERC’s preferred award structure under this category is a prime grantee who organizes the activity and covers costs for all participants, and no sub-recipients. If the concept requires an alternative structure, note those constraints here. Applicants with questions about award structure are encouraged to reach out to MERC. Describe organizational and operational plans for managing the collaboration financially and programmatically.
- b. **Personnel:** List all organizers and consultants (see definitions above). State their expected engagement, roles, and tasks under the proposed activity and briefly justify their qualifying expertise. If applicable, note any relevant past cooperation between the personnel.

8. **Participants:** (approx. ½ page) Estimate the total number of participants (not including the previously named organizers and consultants) and indicate the country(ies) they will be joining from. If applicable, describe how participants will be contacted or recruited to participate. Activities should aim to primarily benefit participants from developing, USAID-presence eligible MENA partners. Clearly state any expected

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engagement, roles, and tasks for early career researchers and graduate students. Travel support for individuals or institutions not among the eligible MENA partners (e.g., U.S., Europe), even if the activity is hosted in the MENA region, will not be considered.

- a. **Equitable participation and benefit:** Specifically address any potential gender-related biases (e.g., equitable participation, benefit from the outcomes) inherent in the planned activity. Consider any difference in how women, men, youth, those with disabilities, or other minority groups might engage with, benefit from, or equitably participate in the activity.

9. **Outcomes:** (approx. ¼ to ½ page) Describe the anticipated outcomes from the activity, including submission of pre-proposals to MERC or another donor, follow-on activities, publications or other deliverables, or any other intended continued contact with participants or post-activity information dissemination.

10. **Contingencies:** Describe any contingency plans. Consider options in the event the estimated number of participants are not able or willing to attend, or a situation in the region prevents cross-border or international travel.

11. **Budget:** (1 to 2 pages) Provide a budget table. A screenshot of MS Excel Budget Template tables (see below in Part B) are appropriate to insert in this section, but the images must be legible. Specific notes on the anticipated expenses under this funding opportunity follow:

- **Personnel:** Applicants may include costs associated with staff time for organization and travel coordination. Preferably these costs would be shared by the applicant institution(s).
- **Activity costs:** Individually itemize any facility rental fees, and materials and supplies for participants. Travel and transport costs of participants during a training, workshop, or seminar (e.g., hiring a bus to visit field sites as part of a meeting or workshop) may be included here.
- **Travel costs:** Separate into the categories below. If travelers are departing from multiple international locations, it may be helpful to duplicate the travel cost section for each set of travelers from each location. Indicate the number of travelers and number of days/nights, as applicable.
 - Air travel: All U.S. federal government financed international air transportation is required by [49 U.S.C. 40118](#), commonly referred to as the "Fly America Act," to use U.S. air carrier service for all air travel and cargo transportation services. Exceptions vary depending on the direction of travel and are outlined in [41 CFR 301-10.136](#) and [41 CFR 301-10.137](#). Budget accordingly. Tickets should be economy class and any exceptions must be justified and approved by MERC.
 - Lodging: Rates must not exceed the [U.S. Government rates](#).
 - Per diem: Costs should be modest, and must not exceed the [U.S. Government rates](#).
 - Ground transportation: Costs associated with arrival/departure from the activity.
 - Other expenses: May include border crossing fees, visa fees, etc.
- **Indirect costs:** See SECTION I for guidance on how to calculate indirect costs (i.e., overhead). Note that the *de minimus* indirect cost rate cannot be applied to per diem. Participant travel costs may also be excluded depending on the activity proposed.

12. **Budget justification:** (½ to 1 page) A narrative must explain how the individual items of the budget were derived and calculated. Explain the basis of the proposed costs for each line item and confirm adherence with the policies described in SECTION I. BUDGET GUIDANCE, or justify any deviation. Take great care to ensure that the budget justification matches the amounts listed in the budget spreadsheet, and that those costs also match the details of the proposal.

13. **NCAGE and SAM registration:** The submitting institution (i.e., the prime recipient/grantee) must provide both their NCAGE code and Unique Entity Identification (UEI) from SAM.gov with their proposal package. See SECTION F, Part III. Federal Registrations for more information. Sub-recipients/awardees

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are not required to have a UEI number prior to the submission of a proposal but must have one prior to a sub-award being issued.

14. **Signature page:** Attach a signature page as indicated below.

- c. **Organizers' signatures:** Provide signatures of the primary organizer and co-organizers from each of the cooperating institutions, affirming the following declaration:

The undersigned affirm that this proposal represents their individual and collective original work, and that they individually and collectively agree to participate in the activity as described if funded.

- d. **Authorizing signatures:** Provide signatures of authorized officials from the institution designated to be the prime grantee, and from each institution that is proposed to receive a sub-grant, affirming the following declaration:

Each of the undersigned affirms that this proposal represents an authorized submission of the institution that the undersigned represents, that it has been prepared using the appropriate accounting and other practices of that institution, and that the institution intends to devote the specified staff, facilities, and financial resources to the project if funded.

B. Required Documents

Proposal: As described above in Part A and saved as a single PDF. If provisionally approved, MERC may request revisions, or additional details or clarification to the proposal.

Budget: Review SECTION I. BUDGET GUIDANCE. Applicants should use the template provided in APPENDIX B (“Travel & Workshop” tab) to prepare a budget based on realistic anticipated costs associated with the proposed work plan. Submit as a MS Excel file.

SF-424: The submitting institution must provide the completed Application for Federal Assistance (SF-424). Instructions relevant to MERC applicants are included in APPENDIX A. A fillable PDF can be downloaded here: <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/forms/sf-424-family.html>

C. Submitting the Proposal

Submit the required documents as one email with attachments to **merc@usaid.gov** by **11:59pm on January 15, 2024** with the email subject “MERC Travel/Workshop Grant Proposal - LAST NAME” including the last name of the primary organizer. MERC will acknowledge receipt of proposals by email. Hard copies are not accepted.

[END OF SECTION C]

SECTION D. PROPOSAL REVIEW INFORMATION

MERC is committed to ensuring a competitive and standardized process for awarding funding. Proposals will be screened to determine whether they meet the eligibility requirements outlined in SECTION B and have followed the required format in SECTION C. Proposals that do not meet these requirements may not advance to review and may be deemed ineligible for funding under this NOFO.

Proposals will be reviewed by an Interagency Committee composed of U.S. Agency for International Development and U.S. Department of State representatives from technical and regional offices. This committee meets to review each eligible proposal and decide which to invite for full proposal submission, or to otherwise advance. Final award decisions will be influenced by whether the proposal meets MERC's programmatic goals and objectives

I. Applied Research Grants

The MERC Interagency Committee uses the following criteria to evaluate pre-proposals (and full proposals) under the applied research grants and continuation funding categories:

Strength and durability of regional cooperation: The project should be a collaborative effort between Israeli and eligible MENA partners. All partners should have full intellectual roles. The project should include joint activities such as frequent meetings, workshops and training of students through exchanges between countries. U.S. partners and support for the participation of additional individuals or institutions from outside Israel and the eligible MENA partners is not a key feature of the MERC Program, but may be considered for modest roles in exceptional cases to meet an essential technical need that is not available in the region.

Relevance to regional development: The project should advance practical applications to development in the Middle East and North Africa and address an issue of humanitarian, economic, and/or environmental importance. The proposed work should be relevant to the Middle East and North Africa region and stand to benefit from a regional approach opposed to separate local or national efforts.

Likely impact and pathway to implementation: Benefits should target developing USAID-presence countries, not primarily accrue to the more affluent partner country(ies), and potentially benefit a large number of people (for example, via jobs, health, environmental protection, etc.). Investigators must demonstrate that there is a need for the potential benefits realized from the project. There should be specific mechanisms to put the research results into practice, particularly in developing USAID-presence country(ies).

Technical merit and innovation: The project should have a sound, credible step-by-step technical work plan, supported by technical background and documentation of relevant previous work. The work should be based on clearly stated hypotheses and objectives. It should explore original concepts and either advance the state of the science or provide an innovative regional application.

Capacity building: The project should advance the research capacity of scientists, students, and institutions, for example through training, provision of equipment, and mentoring. Enhancing the capacity of decision makers and end-users of project technologies is also encouraged.

Management structure: The project should be led by qualified investigators, and have an effective institutional management structure likely to achieve its stated goals and capable of managing U.S. federal funds.

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Budget: The project budget should consist of reasonable costs and be justified in relation to the proposed activities and expected outcomes. All necessary and realistic expenses to achieve the proposed activities must be included. At least 50 percent of the total budget should be directed toward benefiting the developing USAID-presence country(ies) in the region.

II. Continuation Funding

Same as above: I. Applied Research Grants. Past performance at achieving the above criteria will also be considered.

III. Travel and Workshop Grants

The MERC Interagency Committee uses the following criteria to evaluate travel and workshop grant proposals:

Potential to contribute to future cooperation: The project should facilitate a collaborative activity between Israeli and eligible MENA partners. The joint activity should have well defined anticipated outcomes that would lend themselves to continued cooperation and, ideally, the submission of a pre-proposal(s) to the MERC program in a future cycle. Preference is given to applicants seeking support for travel and activities within Israel and the MENA region. Travel support for individuals or institutions not among the eligible MENA partners (e.g., U.S., Europe), even if the activity is hosted in the MENA region, will not be considered.

Relevance to regional development: The proposed activity should focus on an issue of humanitarian, economic, and/or environmental importance to the MENA region and stand to benefit from a regional approach opposed to separate local or national efforts.

Likely impact: Investigators must demonstrate that there is a need for the potential benefits associated with the activity's central topic, and that travel or workshop funding is the first step in formulating a partnership and/or project design that has the potential to reach a large number of people (for example, via jobs, health, environmental protection, etc.) particularly in developing or USAID-presence countries in the MENA region.

Technical merit: The focus of the proposal should be well-justified and supported by a discussion of current knowledge, knowledge gaps, or dissemination needs that would benefit from future research or outreach efforts.

Management structure: The activity should be led by qualified individuals/institutions with a demonstrated track record of convening productive scientific meetings, handling complex international travel logistics, and capable of managing U.S. federal funds.

Budget: The project budget should consist of reasonable costs and be justified in relation to the proposed activities and expected outcomes. All necessary and realistic expenses to achieve the proposed activities must be included. At least 50 percent of the total budget should be directed toward benefiting the developing USAID-presence country(ies) in the region.

[END OF SECTION D]

SECTION E. FUNDING LIMITATIONS, RESTRICTIONS, AND OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This section is provided for informational/reference purposes. No action is required by the applicant.

I. Awards to Commercial Firms or For-Profit Organizations

MERC prohibits profit under its assistance awards to commercial organizations. No funds will be paid as profit to any recipient that is a commercial organization. Profit is defined as any amount in excess of allowable direct and indirect costs. The allowability of costs incurred by commercial organizations is determined in accordance with the provisions of the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) at 48 CFR Part 31. Program income earned by the recipient may be:

- Added to the total of the amount of this award, including the required cost sharing or matching, and use it to further eligible project objectives;
- Used to meet the Recipient's cost sharing or matching requirement;
- Deducted from the total project or program allowable cost in determining the net allowable costs on which the federal share of costs is based.

II. Audit Requirements

Domestic and foreign organizations that expend \$750,000 or more in a fiscal year in federal assistance must perform an independent, recipient-contracted Single Audit or Program Specific Audit. (*Program-specific Audit* means an audit of one Federal award program. *Single Audit* means an audit which includes both the entity's financial statements and the Federal Awards to be conducted in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards (GAGAS). The audits must be independently and professionally executed in accordance with GAGAS either prescribed by a government's Supreme Audit Institution with auditing standards approved by the Comptroller General of the United States, or the host country's laws or adopted by the host country's public accountants or associations of public accountants, together with generally accepted international auditing standards. However, foreign entity audits consistent with International Standards for Auditing or other auditing standards are acceptable with the Grants Officer's approval. More information can be found at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/693136.pdf>

For sub-non-Federal entities expending \$750,000 or more in Department of State award funding during their fiscal year, Department of State standard audit provisions require that Prime non-Federal entities certify that audits of sub-non-Federal entities are performed annually and according to the standards described above. The cost of audits required under this policy may be charged either as an allowable direct cost to the award OR included in the organizations established indirect costs in the award's detailed budget.

III. Compliance with Applicable Federal Funding Regulations and DOS Terms and Conditions

Payment of funds awarded under this Notice of Funding Opportunity will not be disbursed until the DOS has been assured that the Recipient's financial management system will provide effective control over and accountability for all Federal funds in accordance with 2 CFR 200 and 2 CFR 600 as applicable. Awards issued under this NOFO are subject to the Department of State Standard Terms and Conditions (<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/U.S.-Department-of-State-Standard-Terms-and-Conditions-10-01-2019508.pdf>) and 2 CFR 200 and 2 CFR 600 as applicable.

[END OF SECTION E]

SECTION F. FEDERAL AWARD ADMINISTRATION INFORMATION

This section is provided for informational/reference purposes. No action is required by the applicant.

I. Award Notices

MERC expects to notify applicants regarding the status of their proposal (invitation to submit a full proposal, provisional approval, or decline) by **April 2024**. Refer to the figure under SECTION A, Part V for additional details about the process and timeline.

The ultimate decision to advance a proposal for award requires the concurrence of other offices at USAID, and is contingent upon the availability of funds. Successful applicants will receive a Federal Assistance Award (FAA) from MERC's DOS Grants Office. The FAA and the original proposal with subsequent modifications (if applicable) shall be the only binding authorizing document between the recipient and the U.S. Government. The FAA will be signed by an authorized Grants Officer and transmitted to the recipient's responsible officer identified in the proposal. MERC reserves the right to award funding to applicants under this announcement for a period of up to two years after the announcement's close date.

Payment method: Payment to the prime recipient will be made by electronic funds transfer. Payment schedules will be determined by the Grants Officer and specified in the award document.

II. Reporting Requirements

Reports are required as a means of evaluating the recipient's progress and utilization of resources. They are divided between a performance progress report and a financial status report.

Recipients will be required to submit Semi-Annual Performance Reports and Semi-Annual Financial Reports. Performance reports will compare actual to planned performance, contain analysis and summary of findings, share preliminary results as well as published and publicly available materials related to the project's outcomes, and report on joint activities and outreach. Financial reports provide a means of monitoring expenditures and comparing costs incurred with progress. Final performance and financial reports will also be required as part of award close-out.

Recipients must report immediately when a program faces unplanned delays in implementation, fails to meet program targets or milestones, or costs increase. Any changes or revisions to the approved budget require prior approval from the MERC.

III. Federal Registrations

In order to receive U.S. Federal funds, recipients and sub-recipients must register with the System for Award Management (SAM) and obtain a Unique Entity Identification (UEI) number. SAM registration is free and can be obtained at SAM.gov. To create a new SAM account, go to <https://sam.gov/content/entity-registration>. For help with SAM.gov, please visit their support page at <https://www.fsd.gov> or contact them at: 866-606-8220 (U.S.) or +1-334-206-7828 (international). Carefully read all provided instructions and monitor your e-mail inbox for time sensitive notifications. SAM registration must be renewed annually.

Non-U.S.-based organizations may be asked to provide an NCAGE code as part of the SAM registration process. Applicants without an NCAGE code may apply for one with the NATO Support and Procurement Agency: <https://eportal.nspa.nato.int/Codification/CageTool/request-new-cage>

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The process of obtaining or renewing a SAM.gov registration may take 4-8 weeks. The process for non-U.S.-based organizations may take longer than anticipated. For approved proposals that reach pre-award negotiation, MERC will attempt to provide support to applicants facing difficulties with this process.

IV. Administrative and National Policy Requirements

Before submitting a proposal, applicants should review all the terms and conditions and required certifications which will apply to this award, to ensure that they will be able to comply. These include:

- [2 CFR 25 - Universal Identifier and System for Award Management](#)
- [2 CFR 170 - Reporting Subaward and Executive Compensation Information](#)
- [2 CFR 175 - Award Term for Trafficking in Persons](#)
- [2 CFR 182 - Governmentwide Requirements for Drug-Free Workplace \(Financial Assistance\)](#)
- [2 CFR 183 - Never Contract with the Enemy](#)
- [2 CFR 600 – Department of State Requirements](#)
- [U.S. Department of State Standard Terms and Conditions](#)

In accordance with the Office of Management and Budget's guidance located at 2 CFR 200, all applicable Federal laws, and relevant Executive guidance, the Department of State will review and consider proposals for funding, as applicable to specific programs, pursuant to this notice of funding opportunity in accordance with the [Guidance for Grants and Agreements in Title 2 of the Code of Federal Regulations](#) (2 CFR), as updated in the Federal Register's 85 FR 49506 on August 13, 2020, particularly on:

- Selecting recipients most likely to be successful in delivering results based on the program objectives through an objective process of evaluating Federal award proposals (2 CFR part 200.205),
- Prohibiting the purchase of certain telecommunication and video surveillance services or equipment in alignment with section 889 of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2019 (Pub. L. No. 115—232) (2 CFR part 200.216),
- Promoting the freedom of speech and religious liberty in alignment with *Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty* (E.O. 13798) and *Improving Free Inquiry, Transparency, and Accountability at Colleges and Universities* (E.O. 13864) (§§ 200.300, 200.303, 200.339, and 200.341),
- Providing a preference, to the extent permitted by law, to maximize use of goods, products, and materials produced in the United States (2 CFR part 200.322), and
- Terminating agreements in whole or in part to the greatest extent authorized by law, if an award no longer effectuates the program goals or agency priorities (2 CFR part 200.340).

V. Applicant Vetting as a Condition of Award

No action is required by the applicant at this time. Applicants requiring vetting will receive instructions from the Grants Officer.

Applicants are advised that successful passing of vetting to evaluate the risk that funds may benefit terrorists or their supporters is a condition of award. Applicants may be asked to submit information required by DS Form 4184, Risk Analysis Information about their company and its principal personnel. Vetting information is also required for all sub-award performance on assistance awards identified by the Grants Officer, information may be submitted on the secure web portal at <https://ramportal.state.gov>, via email to RAM@state.gov, or hardcopy to the Grants Officer. Questions on the form may be emailed to RAM@state.gov. Failure to submit information when requested, or failure to pass vetting, may be grounds for rejecting a proposal for award.

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Only individuals, sub-recipients and beneficiaries who have successfully passed vetting may receive assistance or participate in this award. Individuals refusing to provide vetting data – or who provide false data – will not be eligible to receive assistance. Individuals who do not successfully pass vetting will not be eligible to receive assistance. Vetting must be completed 10 business days prior to an activity and may not occur retroactively.

VI. Special Note Regarding Programs in the West Bank and Gaza

Applicants proposing activities in the **West Bank and Gaza** are required to adhere to the following:

Proposed programs must comply with, and take into consideration the limitation on, the use of funds in the “Taylor Force Act” (See 22 USC 2378c-1(a)(1)). The Taylor Force Act, signed into law as part of FY 2018 Appropriations Act, limits the U.S. Government’s ability to provide assistance that confers a “direct benefit” to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Proposed programs must also take into consideration U.S. restrictions on contact with Designated Terrorist Organizations, including the parameters of existing Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) licenses, particularly with regard to proposed activities in Gaza. Vetting will be required for key individuals, sub-awardees, and beneficiaries as described above in SECTION F. V.

VII. Special Provision for Performance in a Designated Combat Area (SPOT) Requirements

Applicants proposing activities in **Iraq** are required to adhere to the following:

All recipient personnel deploying to an area of combat operations, as designated by the Secretary of Defense under federal assistance over \$150,000 or performance over 30 days must register in the Department of Defense maintained Synchronized Pre-deployment and Operational Tracker (SPOT) system. Recipients of federal assistance awards shall register in SPOT before deployment, or if already in the designated operational area, register upon becoming an employee under the assistance award and maintain current data in SPOT. Information on how to register in SPOT is available from the Grants Officer or Grants Officer Representative.

Recipients utilizing personnel who are not performing private security functions must account for personnel within the SPOT system anonymously through the use of the aggregate count functionality. This includes U.S. Citizens, Third Country Nationals (TCN), and Locally-hired Iraqi personnel except as noted in the following paragraph.

Recipients utilizing personnel who are performing a private security function; are performing duties as a translator or interpreter; require access to U.S. facilities, services, or support; or desire consideration for refugee or special immigrant status under the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act of 2007 (subtitle C of title XII of Public Law 110–181 must be entered into SPOT individually with all required personal information. If a locally-hired Iraqi falls into one of these categories, the recipient must enter all of the required identification data into SPOT.

When the Recipient is ready to enter, U.S. Citizens, Third Country Nationals (TCN), and/or locally-hired individuals using the Aggregate Count method, the Recipient will notify the Grants Officer who will contact the Department SPOT Program Manager (A/LM/AQM) to obtain the “Aggregate Count” template. The Recipient will complete the “Aggregate Count” template and return to the SPOT Program Manager who will ensure that aggregate counts are loaded into SPOT.

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The Recipient's SPOT Administrator is responsible for updating the aggregate locally hired national count on a quarterly basis by providing updated information via the "Aggregate Count" template to the GO/GOR for each award who will forward to the Department SPOT Program Manager for SPOT entry.

Recipient performance may require the use of armed private security personnel. To the extent that such private security contractors (PSCs) are required, recipients are required to ensure they adhere to Chief of Mission (COM) policies and procedures regarding the operation, oversight, and accountability of PSCs.

Recipient performance may require the use of armed private security personnel. To the extent that such private security contractors (PSCs) are required, recipients are required to ensure they adhere to Chief of Mission (COM) policies and procedures regarding the operation, oversight, and accountability of PSCs.

As specific COM policies and procedures may differ in scope and applicability, recipients of federal assistance awards are advised to review post policies and procedures carefully in this regard and direct any questions to the Embassy Regional Security Office (RSO) via the Grants Officer Representative (GOR). Any exclusion to these policies must be granted by the COM via the RSO. COM policies and procedures may be obtained from the RSO via the GOR. Recipients of federal assistance awards are also advised that these policies and procedures may be amended from time to time at the post in response to changing circumstances.

Recipients of federal assistance awards are advised that adherence to these policies and procedures are considered to be a material requirement of their award. Recipients of federal assistance awards are reminded that only the Grants Officer has the authority to modify the Notice of Award. Recipients shall proceed with any security guidance provided by the RSO, but shall advise the Grants Officer and the GOR of the guidance received and any potential cost or schedule impact.

VIII. Branding and Marking Requirements for Grantees

Grantees awarded under this announcement will be required to make all materials produced under the award with the USAID red, white, and blue emblem. Materials are defined as but not limited to: training materials, materials for recipients, or materials to communicate or promote with foreign audiences a program, event, project, or some other activity under this award, including but not limited to invitations to events, press materials, event backdrops, podium signs, etc. In addition, sub-recipients or sub-awardees are subject to the marking requirements and the grantee shall include a provision in the sub-recipient or sub-awardee's agreement indicating these marking requirements. Exceptions to this requirement can be discussed when negotiating an award.

IX. Sub Awardee Reporting Requirement

Grantees awarded under this announcement will be required to report all sub-awardees receiving funds of \$25,000.

[END OF SECTION F]

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SECTION G. AGENCY CONTACTS

For questions regarding this funding opportunity contact: merc@usaid.gov

[END OF SECTION G]

SECTION H. DISCLAIMER

The terms and conditions published in this NOFO are binding and may not be modified by any Program representative. Explanatory information that contradicts public language will not be binding. Issuance of the NOFO does not constitute an award commitment on the part of the U.S. government. MERC reserves the right to reduce, revise, or increase proposal budgets in accordance with the needs of the program and the availability of funds. Awards made will be subject to periodic reporting and evaluation requirements listed in this NOFO.

[END OF SECTION H]

SECTION I: BUDGET GUIDANCE

I. Personnel

Personnel costs must be consistent with the cost-of-living in the recipient countries and they should be consistent with the previous three-year compensation history of the recipient or position. MERC may request institutional pay scales to confirm the rates are appropriate.

Investigators: Salary support for principal investigators and other professional-level staff is generally not supported. Institutionally supported salaries should be listed as cost share support at the appropriate level of effort and corresponding amount per year.

Consultants: Consulting fees may be included when necessary for the professional services of outside experts, but not for the project team. For example, fees may be paid to an outside economist for a cost-feasibility analysis, or an outside attorney if needed to assist in securing patents, but consultant fees are not to be paid to investigators. Very few MERC projects include any paid consultants.

Students and staff: Salaries or stipends for students, post-doctoral fellows, research assistants, technicians, laborers, interns, etc. are allowed. Institutions in Israel and other affluent countries where salaries and the cost of living are comparatively high should provide cost share to help support their students, post-doctoral fellows, technicians, etc. in order to partially offset higher salary costs. MERC funds should be preferentially targeted to ensure the full participation of the students and research staff in the participating countries that are less economically advantaged.

II. Equipment

Equipment is defined as any item valued at \$5,000 or more and an expected life of two years or more. Only request equipment that is critical to the proposed research and not available in existing facilities. Maintenance for existing or proposed equipment may be included under “Other Direct Costs.”

Equipment expenditures are expected to benefit laboratories in economically disadvantaged settings. Purchase of vehicles with MERC funds is prohibited.

III. Materials and Supplies

This category includes individual items with a value of less than \$5,000. Materials and supplies may be estimated as a single line item sum in a pre-proposal for applied research grants, but costs will be required to be justified to the maximum extent possible in any invited full proposal and in proposals for Continuation Grants and Travel and Workshop Grants.

IV. Travel

For Applied Research Grants, travel costs may be estimated as a single sum in the pre-proposal, but costs will be required to be justified to the maximum extent possible in any invited full proposal.

For Continuation Grants, applicants should complete the “Continuation - Travel” tab of the budget template (APPENDIX B) and itemize travel costs on a trip-by-trip basis, and then reflect those trips in the budget for the year they would occur.

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For Travel and Workshop Grants, travel should be itemized under “Travel Costs” in the “Travel and Workshop - Total” tab of the budget template.

V. Other Direct Costs

Typical items under this category include expenses associated with workshops and training, stakeholder outreach, equipment maintenance, and publication fees. Services, rental fees, website hosting fees, communications costs, etc. can also be included here.

VI. Indirect Costs

If a proposal is advanced for award negotiation, MERC will work with applicants to ensure indirect costs are calculated appropriately, but it is imperative that the rest of the budget be clearly itemized.

Option 1: Applicants with a currently valid Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA) on file with the U.S. Government may use their NICRA rate to request indirect costs. A NICRA is a formal agreement between the U.S. Government and an organization that provides a rate (specified as a percentage) the organization may use to request indirect costs, as well as details on how the organization should apply the rate in their proposed budget. A copy of the NICRA should be submitted with the proposal. (Note: This documentation is not required of pre-proposals for Applied Research Grants.) *Organizations may choose to voluntarily reduce the NICRA rate charged to the award in order to be more cost effective and competitive.*

Option 2: Applicants without a NICRA may charge a *de minimus* rate of 10% on allowable cost categories (also referred to as the “Modified Total Direct Cost”). Allowable categories include: direct salaries and wages, materials and supplies, travel, services, and up to \$25,000 of each sub-award agreement (i.e., \$2,500 per sub-award) which is intended to cover any administrative and legal support associated with the management of the sub-award.

The *de minimus* rate cannot be applied to equipment, capital expenditures, charges for patient care, rental costs, tuition remission, scholarships, fellowships, per diem, honoraria, or compensation for participation in a study, or the portion of sub-award agreements in excess of \$25,000. Under the Travel and Workshop Grants category, participant travel costs may also be excluded depending on the activity proposed.

Option 3: If the recipient does not have a NICRA and elects not to use the *de minimis* rate, then overhead costs may be broken out by individual item (e.g., office rent, electricity, accountant fees, etc.) and charged as direct costs. The applicant must explain their calculations in the Budget Justification and MERC may question or disallow costs and calculations that seem unreasonable. In general, the amount charged should be relative to the resources being spent on the award activity.

VII. Cost Sharing

The non-Federal share of costs, frequently called “cost share,” “matching funds,” or “in-kind” refers to that portion of the project or program costs not borne by the U.S. federal government. No minimum or maximum percentage is required for this competition; however, institutions in Israel and other affluent countries are expected to provide cost share in order to offset comparatively higher salaries and costs. MERC funds should be preferentially targeted to ensure the full participation of the students and research staff in

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participating countries that are less economically advantaged. The value of any cost share should be estimated in the proposal. Contributions may be cash or in-kind (staff time, facilities, etc.). "Blending" MERC-funded research with complementary, additional funding from other sources is allowed and encouraged wherever possible and appropriate. Cost share must be realistic and cannot come from another grant or subcontract issued by USAID, U.S. Department of State, or any other U.S. Government Agency.

[END OF SECTION I]