THE MIDDLE EAST REGIONAL COOPERATION PROGRAM (MERC)

Deadline for receipt of <u>Pre</u>-proposals is <u>December 15, 2008</u>

Please read these guidelines carefully, as application instructions change from year to year.

USAID's MERC Program funds peer-reviewed collaborative research projects between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Established as a result of the Camp David Peace Accords to promote Arab-Israeli cooperation, MERC has expanded beyond its original participants, Egypt and Israel, to include many countries throughout the region. To date, the program has also funded Arab-Israeli projects with participation from Jordan, Morocco, West Bank/Gaza, Lebanon, and Tunisia. During 2007, MERC supported nearly 40 active Arab-Israeli projects in a wide range of topics.

The dual goals of the MERC Program are:

1) To contribute to development and the quality of life in the Middle East region through the application of research and technology.

2) To contribute to Arab-Israeli cooperation by establishing strong working relationships that last beyond the life of the project.

USAID-MERC funds cooperative technical projects in a wide variety of areas, including but not limited to agriculture, health, environment and engineering. Funds may be provided for grants of up to $1 million and up to five years in length, although proposals of more modest size are strongly encouraged and are usually more competitive. Awards are based on technical merit and the contribution to cooperation and development in the region. In this regard, genuine Arab-Israeli partnerships and regional significance are key elements of all successful MERC projects.

<u>ELIGIBILITY</u>

Only proposals developed jointly by Arab and Israeli investigators are accepted. Projects must include <u>at</u> <u>least</u> one Israeli <u>and</u> one Arab institutional partner. Projects involving three or more regional partners are also allowed. A proposal may be submitted by any party in the collaboration. Partners may come from academic, private sector, non-governmental, or governmental institutions.

The only non-regional partners allowed are U.S. institutions, although U.S. participation is not encouraged. <u>If</u> an American partner is included, their role in the project should be limited to providing technical assistance and must be justified as providing an <u>essential</u> <u>technical</u> contribution unavailable in the Middle East. The use of any U.S. institution to lead or administer the overall

project is very strongly discouraged, and is strictly prohibited in the case of U.S. Government agencies. The major focus of the MERC Program is on fostering direct cooperation among Middle Eastern individuals and institutions.

MERC strongly encourages women, minorities, and persons with disabilities to participate fully in its competitive program. No person will be excluded from participation on the basis of race, color, age, sex, national origin (as distinct from current nationality), or disability.

TOPICS OF INTEREST

MERC projects are not restricted to a particular technical sector. The program seeks applied research and technology development proposals within the broad areas of the natural and physical sciences and engineering. Investigators are also encouraged to integrate social science approaches, economics and the use of computer technology into the research where appropriate. However, it is not considered appropriate or innovative to include sophisticated methodologies when they do not address the overall development goals of the project. The program aims to promote researcher-initiated ideas, and thus, USAID does not assist in proposal development.

Ideally, MERC projects should apply research and technology to regional problems rather than issues of strictly local or even global concern. 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 food production, water conservation and efficient use, and reduction of the burden of disease through better treatments or health-management strategies.

In addition to emphasizing a collaborative approach to applied research, the MERC Program seeks to strengthen human and institutional capacities in the Middle Eastern countries. Ideally, MERC projects will also have impacts on management and policy-making in the region. Travel and training within the Middle East are encouraged, but only to achieve the purposes of a well-defined project and not as independent and unrelated requests. Other subsidiary aspects of a research project such as equipment, modest improvement of facilities, communications, journal subscriptions, publications, and dissemination of results are supported, but only as they directly relate to the needs of the project. MERC projects may also include additional "people to people" components beyond the research program, such as joint Arab-Israeli educational activities or extension training. However, these components must directly complement the technical activities of the research project and enhance cooperation.

Ultimately, the MERC Program strives to build sustained Arab-Israeli cooperation. Most of all, the program places a premium on projects based on true intellectual partnerships which can be sustained well beyond the lifetime of the grant.

WHAT IS NOT FUNDED

MERC does not fund purely basic research, but rather, projects that will contribute to development in an estimated time frame of ten years or less. Additionally, the program distinguishes research from development projects and technology transfer. The program does not support projects that solely or predominantly represent the development of physical infrastructures, core support for

organizations, or delivery of services. Examples of these types of ineligible projects include the building of laboratories or clinics, delivery of health or educational services, social development programs, or establishment of private enterprises.

With its emphasis on more innovative research activities, the program does not place a high priority on planning or case studies, operations research, surveys, evaluations, baseline data collection, routine geographical mapping, or literature reviews. Since MERC seeks to support long-term, in-depth cooperation built upon defined, collaborative projects, the program does not fund proposals that are primarily conferences or workshops, fellowships or scholarships, professional networking activities, or institutional development grants. These activities may be incorporated as part of a research project; however, they are not eligible to be considered as stand-alone activities.

FUNDING LEVELS

Total MERC funding for all participants over the length of a project (usually 2 to 5 years) may not exceed $1 million, including overhead. Proposals of more modest size are strongly encouraged since MERC has a mandate to use its available funds to maximize the number as well as quality of Arab-Israeli linkages. There is no set minimum amount, and recently awarded grants range in size from approximately $200,000 to $1 million. Larger projects approaching $1 million are not discouraged; however, such proposals bear the burden to clearly demonstrate that the significance of the problem they address, the merit of their approach, and the number of genuine Arab-Israeli linkages they foster at multiple levels throughout the project would outweigh the advantages of MERC supporting a larger number of smaller projects.

GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSIONS

To apply to MERC, please submit a 4-6 page **pre-proposal** in English (font size 11-12 point) using the 11-element format described below. Submissions that exceed **six (6)** pages or do not follow the format may be declined without review. Investigators from all participating institutions should collaborate in writing the pre-proposal. Although signatures are not required at the pre-proposal stage, do not include the names of participants unless they have given their permission. Clearly indicate that the pre-proposal is directed to the MERC Program; mail one original and three copies of the pre-proposal to our Washington, DC address, and send a copy to the email address on page 7.

Pre-proposals **must** follow the format described below and include each of the elements listed:

1. **Project Title:** It should be descriptive, but preferably no longer than one line.

2. **The Investigators:** Include collaborating scientists and their institutional affiliations. Authors' names should be in the following format: surname all in capital letters, and initial caps only for other given names. Add the telephone, fax number, and e-mail addresses of these participating scientists. Do **not** send complete resumes, publications, bibliographies, or institutional agreements at this time. Clearly identify the one lead or principal person who will serve as the key contact for the proposed project and to whom all correspondences should be addressed. Be sure to include the full mailing address for this lead contact person, as well as that of a primary contact from each participating institution.

3. **Technical Project Objective(s):** Provide a numbered list of objectives, with each objective being a very short, 1-3 line description; usually not more than four objectives.

4. **Relevance of the Project to Middle East Development:** Provide a brief justification of the significance of the project to the Middle East region in terms of its importance to <u>development</u> in the Middle East region. Briefly, but clearly, describe the size/magnitude of the problem being addressed, in terms of its impact on the Middle East region.

5. **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 a few key literature references, as appropriate. This summary should also briefly clarify why the proposed research is <u>scientifically</u> important.

6. **Specific Work Plan Description:** Provide a <u>detailed description</u> of the proposed work, outlining the <u>specific</u> <u>activities</u> proposed for this project. State the scientific hypotheses and how they will be tested. In scientific terminology, briefly describe the experimental design. Be very specific about which experiments you intend to do and why. Do not generalize. Similarly, describe and justify any other related technical activities you plan to include.
    > <u>***Note:***</u> *<u>This is a very important section</u>. Many pre-proposals fail because they do not provide a sufficiently specific technical description of the actual work planned.*

7. **Innovation:** Provide a brief description of what is new or innovative about the proposed activity. How does it represent a significant departure from other work in this area? Note that the mere adaptation of existing technology is not considered innovative. Inappropriate inclusion of sophisticated methodology when it is not needed to achieve the overall goal of the project is also not considered innovative.

8. **Project Structure and Management:**
    a) Describe the organizational and operational plan for managing the collaboration financially and programmatically (including meetings, technical and management committees, etc., if applicable). Be sure to identify the <u>one</u> <u>institution</u> that would receive the grant and issue sub-grants to the other partner(s). In addition, very briefly indicate how you know your management structure is feasible and the project can be done within the budget and time period you propose.
    b) Briefly describe the division of labor among partners and the capabilities and substantive contributions of each partner institution. Indicate how the capacity of Middle Eastern institutions to conduct research would be enhanced by the project.
    Note: <u>If</u> a U.S. partner is involved, you must also justify the unique technical contribution not available in the Middle East that this partner brings to the project, and explain why it is essential. Unnecessary use of a U.S. partner for administration is prohibited. The total budget for all U.S. participants (including overhead) should not exceed 15% of the total project budget (Israeli + Arab + American).

9. **Joint Arab-Israeli Activities Planned:** Provide a brief, <u>specific</u> description of the interaction between the Arab and Israeli participants at all levels of the project. Present evidence that this project would be a true intellectual partnership. For example, would there be joint decision making, direct Arab-Israeli exchanges of personnel (e.g., scientists in residence, the training of students from other countries), joint Arab-Israeli publications, conferences and workshops in the region, etc. Be <u>specific</u> about the cooperative activities that would occur

in the project itself. <u>If</u> a U.S. partner is involved in the project, also describe how that partner will avoid becoming a buffer to direct cooperation between the regional parties.

> ***<u>Note:</u>*** *This section on cooperation is an important part of any MERC submission. MERC funds projects that are genuine, <u>joint Arab-Israeli activities</u>, **not** ones that are separate, parallel programs linked by occasional meetings.*

10.   **Expected Benefits of the Project:**
   a) Identify who would be the primary beneficiaries of the information, technologies, or management practices developed by the project, and how impact would be assessed.
   b) Describe how the project results would be disseminated to those beneficiaries, and in what form, to ensure that the impact of the program is realized.
   c) Provide evidence to indicate that the project collaboration or impact will be sustainable beyond the life of the project (e.g., other sources of financial support or institutional commitments; other agents who will begin implementing or using research results such as extension agents, service providers, private sector, etc.).

11.   **Budget:**   Provide a six-item budget in U.S. dollars (without further details), indicating projected expenses in each of the six categories listed below, for each institution. **<u>Use a separate single column for each participating institution.</u>**   (Note that projects are not required to spend in every category.)
   --salaries (<u>list **each** position as a separate cost line:</u> e.g., 100% PhD Student, 50% Postdoc)
   --equipment/materials (including reagents)
   --travel (directly related to the project)
   --training (directly related to the project)
   --overhead
   --other costs (explain these very briefly)
   Also include total expense (sum) by institution and by country, along with the overall total project cost and duration of the project (number of years). Finally, in a short footnote, please separately indicate the other, non-MERC sources of support expected for this activity.

The budget should be based upon an estimate of the minimized actual item costs. Only include costs necessary to accomplish the project. The budget must reflect the prevailing labor rates at each project site, and <u>not</u> include extra items or inflated costs in order to achieve a pre-determined total or pre-determined split among partners. The use of non-MERC matching funds to reduce costs is encouraged. Priority on major equipment purchases should be given to those institutions that have less access to alternate sources of significant funds. Remember the 15% limit on the U.S. share of the total budget. Also note that MERC prohibits the purchase of vehicles of any kind and strongly discourages and normally disallows the use of program funds for large overhead expenses, the payment of salaries to principal investigators or other professional staff, or the purchase of major equipment of non-U.S. origin. Exceptions to these policies are very rare and will require very convincing justification (later, at the full proposal stage), <u>if</u> you are invited to submit a full proposal. Guidelines on the submission of a formal, detailed budget, including further guidance on allowable costs and cost-justification requirements, will be issued with invitations to submit a full proposal.

<u>Pre</u>-proposals should <u>not</u> include biographical data sheets, CVs or resumes, publications, or general institutional information such as brochures. CVs and other information may be requested later <u>if</u> you are invited to submit a full proposal. Letters of support from persons or institutions outside of the proposal are accepted but not required. All applications must stand on their own merits.

Pre-proposals are not binding agreements, and thus, the formal, written agreement of institutions or cooperating partners is not required at this stage. If a full proposal is invited, reasonable modifications of the budget or project work plan are permitted, as long as the scope or cost of the project is not significantly increased. The pre-proposal represents the first step in project development. While brief in length, sufficient detail should be provided in the pre-proposal to convince the review committee of the importance and feasibility of the project.

Incomplete pre-proposals are subject to decline without consideration.

MERC has a small staff. The staff is not able to advise on the status of pre-proposals until the review is completed. You may have to wait about 4-5 months after the submission deadline.

PRE-PROPOSAL REVIEW

Pre-proposals will be reviewed by a committee composed of USAID and State Department representatives from technical offices and Middle East regional bureaus, using the following criteria:

1) **Strength and Durability of Arab-Israeli Cooperation-** The project should be a joint effort instead of parallel programs and have full intellectual involvement of both sides. The project should include specific joint activities such as frequent meetings, workshops and training of students from other countries. **If** a U.S. partner is included they must be an essential technical expert and not a buffer;

2) **Relevance to Regional Development-** The project should provide practical applications to development in the Middle East, address a key problem there, and potentially benefit a large number of people (for example, via jobs, health, environmental protection, etc);

3) **Technical Merit and Innovation-** The project should have a sound technical workplan, and provide either a new technical contribution or a creative application to a significant regional issue; and

4) **Merit and Feasibility of Program Approach-** The project should be cost-effective, enhance Middle East research capacity (training, equipment, etc.), and provide an effective management structure and an approach likely to achieve its stated goals.

All four of the above selection criteria are very important and must be met for any application to succeed. But with MERC's major goal of contributing to regional cooperation, considerable weight is given to the program's requirement for strong, direct Arab-Israeli cooperation.

Pre-proposals judged to be competitive by the review committee will be invited to submit a full proposal. Letters of decline will not contain detailed comments due to the large volume of submissions. Further inquiries regarding pre-proposals must reference the pre-proposal number assigned by USAID at the time of the review. Those invited to submit full proposals will be notified of the format and deadline for full proposals at the time of invitation. The guidelines for full proposals contain similar elements to those above and will require a more detailed description

of the project activities, answers to questions on ethical and safety issues, the CVs or resumes of the participants, and more detailed budget information.

Some smaller projects of $500,000 or less, which are judged by the review committee to be time-sensitive and of sufficiently high quality at the pre-proposal stage, may be handled on a faster track without the formal submission of a full proposal in the long format. However, this "fast track" procedure is not often granted, and has been most frequently used to add additional countries to successful ongoing projects. Most of the pre-proposals under $500,000 in which the review committee finds substantial potential merit receive regular invitations to submit full proposals.

SUBMISSION OF PRE-PROPOSALS

In order to be considered for the next cycle of funding, your pre-proposal must be <u>received in Washington, DC by December 15, 2008</u>. Applicants who meet this deadline should be informed of the status of their pre-proposals by April or May 2009. Applicants whose pre-proposals are judged competitive will be invited to submit full proposals. These proposals will be peer-reviewed by outside experts in the field of the proposal in the fall of 2009, and the applicants should be informed of the results in early 2010. When investigators have substantially met the concerns of the reviewers and the MERC Committee, the remaining required U.S. Government concurrences are sought before an award is made. Grants should begin to be awarded in mid/late 2010; in some cases the wait might be even longer. Funding should never be assumed until a formal, written grant is received from an authorized U.S. Government contracting officer. Pre-proposals received after the December 15, 2008 deadline will not be considered until the next funding cycle.

Submit **one original and three (3)** copies of the pre-proposal **by mail** using the above format. Pre-proposals submitted by Fax will **not** be considered.   Send the pre-proposal to:

> **Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC) Program**
> **U.S. Agency for International Development**
> **EGAT/IP   Room 2.11-153 RRB**
> **1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW**
> **Washington, DC 20523-2110   USA**

<u>In addition</u> to the hardcopies sent to Washington, send **an electronic copy of the pre-proposal to our NEW E-MAIL BOX: <u>merc.copies@gmail.com</u>**

Note: MERC cannot acknowledge receipt of your pre-proposal unless you attach a self-addressed postcard to the front of the first copy of the pre-proposal. Further inquiries regarding pre-proposals must reference the pre-proposal number assigned by USAID at the time of the review.

Further questions about the MERC Program should be directed to the above e-mail address. However, it is not possible to advise on the status of pre-proposals until USAID's review is completed. You may have to wait 4-5 months after the submission deadline.

THE NEXT DEADLINE FOR RECEIPT IN WASHINGTON, DC OF 4-6 PAGE <u>PRE</u>-PROPOSALS IS:

<u>December 15, 2008.</u>