

## About Merc

Recognizing the importance of empowering social scientists and nurturing new generations of well-trained researchers in the Middle East region, the Ford Foundation established the Middle East Research Competition (MERC) in 1986 as a research competition in international relations and comparative politics to serve scholars residing in the Arab countries and Turkey. During the first ten years of its life, MERC was situated in Cairo and administered directly by Ford Foundation's Cairo office. Over this period, it helped shape the career trajectory of over 153 researchers by providing them with resources and opportunities to undertake research in different areas of social science and explore new grounds and critical areas of relevance and significance to the region. MERC grew over the years, expanding its scope to include all social sciences, accumulating experience and enhancing knowledge of the social science scene in the region. Ford Foundation saw that MERC was ready for a gradual move toward autonomy. A request for proposals to administer MERC was circulated and the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) in Beirut was selected to take over MERC, heralding a new phase in the life of the program. MERC remained in Beirut for four years from 1997 to 2001, and then it moved back to Cairo, where it was administered by the Center for the Study of Developing Countries (CSDC) in the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University, which had been the runner-up in the earlier call for proposals, from 2002 to 2005. MERC was initiated as a regional research competition that provides small grants (less than \$35,000) to individual researchers. A multidisciplinary Selection Committee of five renowned regional scholars meets bi-annually to examine research proposals and discuss the program's orientation and future plans. Members serve for two years, after which they rotate off and are replaced by new members. Selection of committee members takes into account geographical and disciplinary representation and members are kept anonymous during their service on the committee. The program is administered by a small Secretariat comprising a director, a program officer, a secretary and a computer specialist. Its responsibilities include the smooth running of daily operations, providing feedback to applicants and grantees and organizing program activities. Decisions to fund proposals are reached unanimously and fall into three main categories: Grant, Workshop Grant, and Reject. All decisions are conveyed to applicants together with detailed written comments that reflect the discussions of the committee. In addition to the grants program, MERC holds lectures by past and present grantees. It also organizes workshops on topics that address the research interests of applicants and grantees. In recent years, the program has organized a series of four research methodology workshops that have attracted scholars from throughout the region. In 2006, the Center for Economic and Social Research (CERES) in Tunis was selected to administer MERC. The period beginning April 2006 heralds a new phase in the life of the program. CERES, in cooperation with the Centre d'études maghrébines à Tunis (CEMAT), will continue to nurture the large network of researchers developed by MERC and enhance the main research and training programs already established by MERC. These have proved successful in filling significant gaps in the regional social science scene. In Tunis, MERC will consider new and fresh mechanisms to respond to emerging needs among researchers region-wide.