

The Near and Middle East Research and Training Act: Background and Current Status

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In July 1991, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee authorized the creation of a new program to fund a broad range of research and training activities on the Near and Middle East. The program, titled "The Near and Middle East Research and Training Act" (NMERTA), is part of the State Department Authorization Bill. The NMERTA has been authorized by the Senate at a level of \$4.0 million/ year. While many hurdles remain to be overcome before this program becomes a reality (notably, it still remains to be appropriated), the Senate's action constitutes a major step forward in efforts to secure the passage of the NMERTA, and holds out hope for a long overdue increase in the level of federal resources available to scholars and specialists on the Middle East. This report offers a brief review of NMERTA, its background, and legislative prospects. It also describes how the act is organized and the range of activities it is intended to support.

The immediate origins of the NMERTA can be traced to the Social Science Research Council in New York. Its success thus far, however, is largely a reflection of current circumstances. Such a program has long been needed and has been discussed informally for several years. Yet it is unlikely that it would (almost) exist today were it not for Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent war. The attention these events focused on the region helped crystalize concerns about the importance of understanding the region, and reaffirmed the need to expand the academic training and basic research programs currently available. Just as importantly, they created an opportunity to mobilize Congressional support for expanded federal funding for scholarly research on the Middle East.

At its March 1991 meeting, the SSRC's Joint Committee on the Near and Middle East agreed to pursue this opportunity, and to initiate efforts to create a federal program of research and training on the region. The Committee adopted as a model the existing and highly successful Soviet and East European Research and Training Act of 1982, also known as the Title-VIII program. In fact, the language adopted by the Middle East Committee for the NMERTA is essentially identical to the language of the Title-VII program. Having Title-VIII available as a model, and as an example of an effective area studies program, greatly facilitated the work of the Middle East Committee in persuading those in Washington of the viability of the NMERTA.

The Committee's efforts to secure passage of the NMERTA got underway last spring, relatively late in terms of the Congress' legislative calendar. The House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs had already completed initial work on its version of the bill authorizing the activities of the Department of State. Nonetheless, the Committee's initiative was in time to persuade the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to add the act as an amendment to its version of the State Department Authorization Bill. The language submitted to the Foreign Relations Committee by the SSRC's Middle East Committee was accepted with no significant changes and was eventually accepted as part of the final Senate version of the bill. At this time, it is anticipated that the amendment will not be challenged when the House and Senate committees meet to reconcile their versions of the State Department Authorization bill.

A number of people deserve important credit for their work on behalf of the NMERTA. Without them, it would remain simply an interesting and worthy idea. Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana has been a crucial supporter of the act. He has been an effective and consistent advocate of the NMERTA within the Congress. His efforts have been ably coordinated by Dr. Andrew K. Semmel, the Senator's Legislative Aide for Foreign Policy. The committee's efforts in Washington have been supported in a remarkable way by Dr. Graeme Bannerman and Ms. Roxanne Perugino of Bannerman and

Associates. Dr. Bannerman, former Staff Director of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and his staff have contributed their time and effort on a pro bono basis to help this initiative. Within the Council, efforts to push ahead with the NMERTA have enjoyed the strong support of the President, Dr. David Featherman, and the Vice President, Dr. Stanley Heginbotham.

The NMERTA identifies a number of activities as crucial to the "development and maintenance of knowledge about the countries of the Near and Middle East." These include, graduate training; advanced training; public dissemination of research data; contact and collaboration among government and private specialists; language training; and firsthand experience in Middle Eastern countries by American specialists, including on-site conduct of advanced training and research to the extent practicable.¹ The act requires that funds be allocated to support a national research program at the post-doctoral level; for graduate, post-doctoral, and teaching fellowships for advanced training in Near and Middle Eastern studies and related studies; for fellowship and research support for American specialists in the fields of Near and Middle Eastern studies and related studies to conduct advanced research with emphasis upon the use of data on the countries of the Near and Middle East; to conduct seminars, conferences, and other workshops designed to facilitate research collaboration between government and private specialists in the field of Near and Middle Eastern studies and related fields; to conduct specialized programs in advanced training and research on a reciprocal basis in the countries of the Near and Middle East designed to facilitate access for American specialists to research institutes, personnel, archives, documentation, and other research and training resources located in the countries of the Near and Middle East; to support training in the languages and dialects of the Near and Middle East; and to support "other research and training in Near and Middle Eastern Studies not otherwise described" in the act.

This is an enormously broad and flexible mandate, opening up a huge realm of activities for support from NMERTA funds. The act is notable for the absence of restrictions it imposes on scholars and students of the region: it is entirely unrestricted with regard to academic discipline, the topics which can be funded, the countries in the region which can serve as focus of research, and the languages for which training funds may be sought. The inclusion of language in act referring to "related studies"

¹ This paragraph is a patchwork of quotations from the act.

means that NMERTA funds may be used for research on topics which include the Middle East as a central focus but extend beyond it, such as research on the Hajj; on transnational religious movements; on the effects of transformation in Soviet Central Asia on the Middle East; on labor migration within the region, as well as the migration of labor to and from the Middle East; on the foreign policies of external actors in the region; as well as comparative studies in which Middle Eastern countries serve as foci; and so on.

In addition, the act is structured to ensure that proposals for research and training are evaluated independently, on the basis of scholarly criteria. In place of a direct process through which scholars would apply to and be evaluated by a federal agency, NMERTA funds will be awarded on a competitive basis to “national organizations with an interest and expertise in conducting research and training concerning the countries of the Near and Middle East and in disseminating the results of such research.” Institutions which “emphasize the development of a stable, long-term research program,” which demonstrate the capacity to carry out a national research competition on a peer-review basis, will receive priority in funding decisions. These organizations will be responsible for developing research and training programs to which both individual scholars and other institutions may apply, and for developing peer-review evaluation procedures to award funds. Decisions about which “national organizations” will receive NMERTA support will be made by a committee set up in the Department of State comprising the Secretaries of State, Defense, and Education (or their representatives); the Librarian of Congress; the President of the Middle East Studies Association, representing the nation’s leading research universities.

Programs developed by the SSRC’s Committee on Soviet Studies using Title-VIII funds give a general illustration of activities which might be supported by the NMERTA. The Soviet Studies Committee currently offers general fellowships for research and training in Russian, Soviet, and East European studies at both the predoctoral and the postdoctoral levels; support for research and development initiatives in Soviet studies; grants for summer language institutes for languages other than Russian; grants for summer Russian language institutes; fellowships for first-year Ph.D. student in underrepresented fields in Soviet studies; a program to alleviate backlogs in Soviet and East European collections in U.S. libraries; and a summer workshop in underrepresented fields in Soviet Studies, targeting sociology and anthropology. Obviously, the specific Middle East programs which might be created with NMERTA funds will not duplicate these, but will reflect the priorities and needs of the Middle East studies community.

The NMERTA has the potential to strengthen the study of the Middle East in the United States. However, as noted above, many obstacles remain before the NMERTA becomes a reality. Not surprisingly, the most important has to do with money. The act will, in all probability, be signed into law by the President. None of these steps, however, guarantee that funds will be appropriated or otherwise allocated for the act. The Middle East Committee and other supporters of the act are now directing

their efforts towards ensuring that the NMERTA is not only authorized, but also appropriated. There are no guarantees that these efforts will succeed. If they do, it is possible that the first cycle of programs supported by NMERTA will be in place around the middle of 1992. If they are not, the Middle East Committee and others will continue to work to persuade Congress of the merits of funding the act, and look to 1993 as the year when the Middle East studies community will be able to benefit from the support provided by the NMERTA.

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