

PENN MIDDLE EAST CENTER LOSES FEDERAL FUNDING

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The Penn Middle East Center (MEC) was originally founded in 1966 with the mission to “examine both individually and regionally the linguistic, historical, political, and socio-economic conditions of the Arab countries and Israel, Turkey, and Iran.”¹ Today, the MEC is a nationally recognized institution that bridges academia and culture of the Middle East and North Africa. The MEC designs the curriculum for and provides advising to students pursuing the Modern Middle East Studies major or minor. They collaborate with other organizations to host cultural events, such as the Middle East Film Festival at the Penn Museum. The center is also known for bringing in renowned speakers, such as Nobel Peace Prize winners, scholars, and professors, from around the world to discuss a range of topics about the Middle East and surrounding regions.

Not only is the center a fundamental resource to students at Penn, but it is also invaluable to the Middle Eastern community in Philadelphia. The MEC works with K-12 schools in the city to develop educational models that incorporate an increased understanding of the Middle East into curriculums. Additionally, the center offers professional development workshops for teachers and coordinates speaker events with Penn faculty and graduate students at local K-12 schools and community colleges. The MEC’s community outreach initiatives even

extend beyond Philadelphia, as they financially support several Midwestern community colleges and have a direct affiliation with the Camden County College in New Jersey.

Penn’s MEC receives the majority of its funding as federal aid from Title VI of the Higher Education Act, which supports international and foreign language centers at universities across the United States. This program has played a critical role in helping build the MEC as an influential establishment; it has awarded the center about \$1 million to employ staff and fund events over a four-year cycle. The center has applied for this federal grant ever since the program was created. However, the MEC’s application for the 2022-2026 cycle was rejected for the second time in the center’s history.

The loss of Title VI funding was devastating news to the MEC, as it required the center to abruptly pause all of their programs and plans for the foreseeable future. In particular, the MEC traditionally uses some of the funding to administer scholarships to Penn students who are a part of the U.S. Department of Education’s Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) program. The program is a federally sponsored scholarship for students who wish to build their language skills and knowledge of critical regions. It awards eligible students between \$5,000 and \$18,000 to further their studies, depending on their level of education and whether they partake in the program for the

full academic year or over the summer.

As of October 4, Penn has committed to funding the center enough to keep it afloat for the next four and a half years, when the center can re-apply for Title VI funding. The University has also promised the MEC that they will make fundraising ef-



PC: Jesse Zhang from *The Daily Pennsylvanian*

forts a major priority; the Vice Provost of University Life will begin to work more closely with the center to help further address its needs.

“I am confident Penn will continue to support what we do. I think it is a clear demonstration of their commitment to Middle East Studies,” MEC Executive Director John Ghazvinian said in an interview with *Fenjan* staff.



THE LARGER ISSUE OF REPRESENTATION: A STUDENT’S PERSPECTIVE

Nadia Mokhallalati

Although Penn is committing to support the MEC in the absence of Title VI funding, this momentary loss brings to light the far larger issue of the lack of support available for Middle Eastern and North African students. As a Syr-

Trump’s presidency, there has been a dangerous era of xenophobia, Islamophobia, and discrimination. These factors leave many MENA students looking for a safe place on campus—yet they are left with limited space, funding, and representation.

Much of the community building for minority groups at Penn has been student-led. Unfortunately, these groups have been battling for basic support from Penn for decades. For example, cultural spaces such as Makuu: The Black Cultural Center, La Casa Latina, and the Pan-Asian American Community House have been limited to the basement of the Arch building; it was only after years of advocating for a more adequate space that 7B—the main minority coalition at Penn—recently acquired the entire Arch and neighboring VPUL building.²

Currently, MENA students are not accurately represented as a minority by existing Penn organizations. As the President of the Penn Arab Student Society, I have witnessed firsthand the barriers to supporting and sustaining our community. Thus, in the aftermath of the MEC’s loss of funding, there has been an invigorated effort by leaders of existing student organizations—such as Penn Arabs, Penn Persians, and Penn Egypt-

tians—as well as other underrepresented students from the region to form a South-West Asian North African (SWANA) coalition. This coalition would include students from diverse Middle Eastern backgrounds, including Arab, Afghan, Armenian, Berber, Kurdish, Persian, Turkish and others. We believe that this coalition will be able to advocate for adequate resources for our student populations by amplifying each other’s events and voices. Our group hopes to continue working to establish our own narratives and gain necessary representation at Penn.

We need Penn to make a true effort to support MENA students in the coming years, and the establishment of this coalition will be a chance to cement and further advocate for our community. Beyond the commitment from students and the MEC, the University must do more to properly support the center’s work and ensure they not only re-qualify for crucial funding, but guarantee this loss never occurs again.

