



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 71-75 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ

Email: office@brismes.org

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Professor Maria Leptin, President of the European Research Council

Professor Torsten Persson, Vice-President (Social Science and Humanities) of the European Research Council

Dr Laurence Moreau, Director of the European Research Council Executive Agency

Dr Philippe Cupers, Head of the Scientific Management Department at the European Research Council Executive Agency

Sent via email

20 March 2026

Dear Prof. Leptin, Prof. Persson, Dr Moreau and Dr Cupers,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our deep concern regarding the complaints levelled against Dr Harry Pettit, and public suggestions by Members of the European Parliament that a European Research Council (ERC) grant should be withdrawn on the basis of Dr Pettit's lawful political beliefs and public expression.

Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the largest national academic association in Europe focused on the study of the Middle East and North Africa. It is committed to supporting academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region, both in the UK and globally.

In July 2025, Dr Pettit was awarded an ERC Starting Grant entitled 'Money as Infrastructure: The Struggle over the Means of Money Circulation in a (Cash)less World.' The grant, worth 1.5 million Euros, is due to start in August 2026.

Since the award of this grant, Dr Pettit has been subject to a series of unfounded allegations aimed at undermining his professional credibility and his ability to carry out his academic work. These allegations have focused on Dr Pettit's anti-Zionist views and his commentary on the situation in the Middle East. While these views may be controversial or offensive to some, the statements in question - made on a private X account - have never been subject to any formal disciplinary process



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at a university, have never been found to violate any rules of a university at which Dr Pettit was employed, and have never been found to contravene any laws.

As you are no doubt aware, **Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)** recognizes that freedom of speech protections extend to **controversial, offensive, or disturbing speech, provided it remains within the law**. The European Court of Human Rights has consistently upheld that:

“Freedom of expression applies not only to ‘information’ or ‘ideas’ that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population.”

(Handyside v United Kingdom, 1976, European Court of Human Rights)

The Court has further recognised academic freedom as a matter of particular importance under Article 10, while Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union explicitly guarantees academic freedom. Lawful political expression by an academic, however contentious, must not be conflated with professional misconduct in the absence of any competent finding that rules or laws have been breached.

Importantly, international standards affirm that academic freedom extends beyond the confines of the university. As the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression has clarified, academic freedom must be understood in its full “extra-mural” sense: scholars are entitled not only to freedom in research and teaching within their institutions, but also to participate as public intellectuals and commentators outside them ([Section 20](#)). Attempts to penalise such lawful expression therefore raise serious concerns under international norms protecting academic freedom.

Academic freedom and freedom of expression within the law are essential for the production of academic research and for the maintenance of an open, democratic society. The awarding of research grants must be based solely on academic merit. Political attempts to influence the funding decisions on the basis of a researcher’s lawful personal views must be resisted in the strongest possible terms.

Beyond the present case, this situation raises broader concerns about a dangerous precedent. If research funding bodies are seen to yield to political pressure, this risks normalising external



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interference in academic evaluation, undermining institutional independence, and creating a chilling effect in which scholars may refrain from engaging in public debate on politically sensitive issues.

As a leading institution committed to excellence and independence in research funding, the European Research Council has a particular responsibility to ensure that its processes remain insulated from political considerations and grounded in scholarly merit alone.

In light of the above, we call upon you to publicly:

- defend the integrity of the academic process through which Dr Pettit's grant was awarded;
- affirm that no lawful political speech, absent any finding of misconduct or illegality, can constitute grounds for the withdrawal of an ERC grant and
- confirm that Dr Pettit will remain the holder of the ERC grant that he was awarded.

We thank you for your attention to this important matter and look forward to your response. As is our standard practice, this letter will be published on our website, and we will be happy to also publish your response.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Nicola Pratt
BRISMES President

Dr Lewis Turner
Chair, BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

To read previous letters and statements from BRISMES CAF, please visit:

[Committee on Academic Freedom](#)
