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Islamic spokesman says Bredeesen's mosque comments are nice, but too little too late

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NASHVILLE — A spokesman for a national Islamic organization said he appreciates Gov. Phil Bredeesen's comments urging Tennesseans to show religious tolerance toward Islamic beliefs, but he wishes the remarks came before a suspected arson incident at the site of a future Murfreesboro mosque.

"That's a good statement, but perhaps it would have been more beneficial coming earlier and also coming earlier in the repudiation of the voices of bigotry that have been very loud in this debate," said Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Federal and state authorities are investigating what they say is suspected arson at the mosque site in which one piece of construction equipment was set ablaze and three others doused with accelerant Saturday.

Asked about Hooper's remarks, Bredeesen press secretary Lydia Linker said Tuesday in an e-mail that "with no disrespect to [Hooper], the governor wasn't asked for his thoughts by the media until yesterday, and that was after this escalated to a level that he feels is clearly out of line."

On Monday, Bredeesen called on Tennesseans "to please have great respect for anyone's religious preferences and their rights to practice those in the United States."

It was the governor's first remarks about the mosque incident as well on the ongoing mosque controversy, which spilled into the political arena during the recent GOP primary for the 6th Congressional District.

Hooper said Bredeesen's remarks were "better than never but still too late."

He also voiced discomfort with remarks made by Republican gubernatorial nominee Bill Haslam about the Murfreesboro incident.

"The [Knoxville] mayor's faith is very important to him, and he respects the right of others to practice their faith, so long as they are respectful of the communities in which they live and the laws of the land," Haslam spokesman David Smith told the Chattanooga Times Free Press on Monday.

Those comments, Hooper said, carry "an implication that somehow Muslims are not respectful of the communities in which they live or the laws of the land. I guess that [Haslam statement] is what you'd call a back-handed compliment."

Smith did not respond to requests for comment and further clarification of Haslam's remarks.

Meanwhile, Hooper characterized as "very strange" comments Democratic gubernatorial nominee Mike McWherter made about the Murfreesboro mosque during a July debate.

"There's a reason why our forefathers adopted that [freedom of religion], adopted that as the First Amendment to our Constitution," McWherter said. "But having said that, I truly understand the concerns in some of these neighborhoods about bringing these kinds of institutions in. You can't just drop these into the middle of a very quiet neighborhood and expect the same quality of life."

Hooper said, "It was very strange. You know, kind of like we don't want any more black families in the neighborhood because more might come in."

Attempts Tuesday to reach McWherter for comment were unsuccessful.

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