

# Israel: Secular neighborhoods unite to counter ultra-Orthodox takeover

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## **Secular residents of Kfar Yona say they fear a change in the character of their village.**

Secular activists fighting the influx of ultra-Orthodox families into their neighborhoods across the country have begun meeting and exchanging advice, Haaretz has learned.

The meetings are reportedly being organized by Yaron Yadan, a well known anti-Haredi activist, but they have yet to produce a new nationwide group. secular - Moti Milrod - March 20 2011

"Each person describes his history of activism and then there's a discussion on methods of action, because sometimes going through legal channels just isn't enough," one activist told Haaretz about the meetings. "You find out that their methods - the ultra-Orthodox - are the same everywhere, and there's little to do but to fight them."

The secular residents say they fear their communities will become overwhelmingly Haredi over the years, though some also said their concern was financial, fearing the value of real estate in their community would drop if large ultra-Orthodox families moved in.

One group of residents in the secular town of Kfar Yona has despaired with legal channels or turning to local newspapers, and has adopted underground tactics to prevent the allocation of land to a Haredi school. Kfar Yona residents established a group code-named the "Decoration Committee," and is waging a public battle using tactics similar to those used by extreme soccer fans.

These tactics include spraying graffiti that slams the project all around the village; hanging anonymous protest placards in the middle of the night; and distributing hundreds of notes in Kfar Yona's city hall, calling for the resignation of local council head Efi Deri.

The group is also trying to keep up a weekly "day of rage" in the village, until the allocation of 14 acres for the school's campus is overruled. The school has been operating in the village since 2002, but its 120 students study in caravans.

"People are getting out into the street because our needs are being continuously disregarded and public land is being given to others," said one secular resident, Meital Yitzhaki Toledano. "We fear this is going to change the character of the village."

Another group of disgruntled residents resorted to more traditional means, gathering 300 signatures to oppose the project. The petitioners argue that the allocation of public land in this case is disproportionate to the village's needs, which is home to only several tens of ultra-Orthodox residents. Members of this secular group told Haaretz that they've received threats.

The school's founder and principal, Rabbi Yosef Hallelujah (who is also Interior Minister Eli Yishai's

brother-in-law ), told Haaretz that he has not heard of any reports of violence on the part of the school's supporters.

"No one is talking about a secular Kfar Yona or an ultra-Orthodox Kfar Yona, we're a Jewish Kfar Yona," he told Haaretz. "All this information is being spread around just to get people panicked. If I was secular, I would probably join the struggle, too - unless I smartened up and checked the facts a little first."

The Kfar Yona local council issued the following response: "There is no risk that the community will become ultra-Orthodox. The school is operating in caravans, under conditions unworthy of its purpose."

**By Gili Cohen**

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\* Source: Haaretz 20 March 2011.