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The National

Opposition in Syria prepares 'Salvation' manifesto

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Opposition activists in Syria expect to finish a "national salvation" manifesto as early as this week to show they offer a viable alternative to the Assad regime.

A major shortcoming of the popular [uprising](#) has been the absence of a clear agenda beyond calls for freedom and demands for political reform. The opposition's new manifesto is meant to fill this gap by outlining their vision for a post-autocracy future.

A lack of unity and coherence has been another weakness among the fractured opposition movement. There have been only locally organised protests rather than national-level political machinery or clearly defined programmes.

In an apparent sign of growing cooperation between different strands of the opposition, however, the "national salvation" document will outline core basic principles.

The manifesto was drawn from the ideas of a broad coalition of leading activists, intellectuals, veteran dissidents and young demonstrators, both inside the country and abroad. Activists aim to use the document as a foundation for a "national salvation" conference in Damascus, where they plan to meet, with or without government approval, and develop more precise details of their programme. At that time the movement will decide on the steps of transition from a one-party security state to a democracy.

Meshal Tammo, a leading Syrian dissident involved in drafting the blueprint, said: "The big question everyone is asking is 'What is the alternative? What is the opposition offering?' and we must answer that now."

Mr Tammo, who was released from prison this month after almost three years in jail on political charges, said the document would include statements about highly sensitive issues including Syria's sectarian and ethnic

The issue of minority groups is particularly explosive, with members of Syria's Alawite, Christian, Druze and Ismaili communities alarmed about the prospects of living under a Sunni Arab majority. Opposition groups say these concerns are real and must be addressed, with firm guarantees that all Syrians will have equal rights and responsibilities.

As the uprising has gathered pace, opposition activists have held meetings to agree on a common platform that also represents the new generation of young protesters who have led the way with their street demonstrations.

Those talks have been hampered by mass arrests, communications blackouts and military operations designed to put down the uprising.

Aref Dalila, an independent economist and former political prisoner who has also been involved in the talks, said: "It has been very complicated. It is a very difficult situation and we are still trying to co-ordinate, but we have made progress."

Mr Dalila and Mr Tammo said those seeking fundamental political reforms in Syria were united on "90 per cent" of their demands, including a free press, free and fair elections, an independent judiciary and an end to one-party rule, among others.

Three months into protests in Syria, the big question is why some people still support the regime. For the elite, the answer is clear. But there's also a striking urban-rural divide in support for the uprising.

Those points have, however, not been codified or formally endorsed in a political platform that others can rally behind. This is what the proposed manifesto aims to address. Though there have been other opposition conferences, two in Turkey and one in Europe, there is widespread suspicion in Syria of exile groups.

Despite an emerging consensus there are still significant divisions within the opposition. "All reformists and protesters are united in wanting democracy," Mr Dalila said. "The real challenge is how to get there, and there are different views about how to manage that critical transition period."

Some activists believe real regime change must include some kind of partnership with the authorities because they are too strong and firmly woven into every level of society to brush

aside. Other dissidents say the autocratic system is incapable of genuinely adapting to new circumstances and cannot be an agent of change.

"At the moment we would like representatives of the regime to take part in the national salvation conference to discuss the transition of power," Mr Tammo said. "The longer the killing goes on, the harder it will be for the opposition to accept that. The window is closing quickly."

The authorities have said they are planning their own dialogue initiative. It has been talked about for weeks and officials have consulted Mr Dalila, among others, on how best to proceed.

But, he said, "no action taken has been taken, no serious steps have been made".

It is rumoured that the president, Bashar Al Assad, will address the nation today for the third time since the crisis began. The previous two addresses did not slow the uprising and analysts say the next address will be of critical importance.

Mr Assad continues to enjoy strong popular support. Many Syrians say he should be given more time to act on his latest reform promises. Analysts in Syria say the silent majority of citizens, who have yet to openly back the protesters or the regime, is wavering as government credibility wanes.

"A month ago, the silent bloc didn't want to hear about any of this. It wanted the problems to go away," said an independent analyst. "Now, they are willing to listen to the opposition, if the opposition can put out a sensible plan. That is a significant change, there is debate taking root."

This assessment was backed by a retired army officer living in Damascus who described himself as a regime supporter.

"I don't love the Baath party or the system we have but no one has shown us an alternative," he said. "I want to know what the opposition is. What are their political, economic and social projects? What will their policy be towards Israel?"

"We need to know those things, otherwise we are being asked to gamble on the future with no idea about what will come. That will only lead to chaos."

Human rights groups say more than 1,400 civilians have been killed by security forces since the uprising began in March. This number is disputed by Syrian authorities, who claim they are fighting an Islamist insurgency, not a peaceful pro-democracy uprising.

Jakob Kellenberger, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), was due to begin a two-day visit in Syria yesterday, in which he will hold talks with senior administration officials. The ICRC has called for humanitarian access to prisoners and victims of violence.