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The situation in some of Iran's provinces is anything but 'normal'

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Government officials in Iran have said that the recent unrest in Zahedan is "under control" and that the situation "is back to normal" after 35 people were killed in a wave of violence in the restive city. But it is hard to believe that we have witnessed the final throes of the insurgency that has been growing in both intensity and savagery in the city and in other parts of the Sistan-Baluchestan Province since 2003.

The Iranian government openly blames foreign powers for the unrest. Authorities have cited media and intelligence reports that have linked Jundullah, the group that claimed this week's mosque bombing and other recent attacks in the province, to the governments of the United States and Britain. They have likewise pointed a finger at Pakistan, accusing the neighboring country of failing to act against Jundullah militants on its territory. But what officials haven't done - at least not publicly - is to take responsibility for the Iranian government's own role in fomenting instability in the province.

Despite a number of recent government development initiatives, Sistan-Baluchestan remains Iran's most underdeveloped and impoverished province. Unemployment in the region is well above the national average, as are the rates of poverty, illiteracy and drug addiction. It is these dire local conditions - not the efforts of foreign powers - that have directly motivated many ethnic Baluch youth to join the ranks of the insurgency. Groups such as Jundullah feed off of a popular sense of frustration among the Baluch minority toward what is seen as the central government's neglect of their plight.

Similar problems are noticeable in other regions of the country, particularly in provinces where ethnic and religious minorities reside. There is an inherent danger in neglecting the development of these outlying areas in that minorities tend to perceive laxity as a sign of discrimination on the part of the Shiite, Persian central government. The popular anger that

results from the state's treatment of these citizens is what leaves the playing field wide open for foreign manipulation.

In a sign that the central government understands the dynamics at play, Iran has in recent years launched a number of initiatives aimed at correcting uneven development. But a handful of programs are not enough to correct decades of state neglect. Nor will these programs do any good if the government continues its habit of responding to unrest in the provinces with an iron fist. Repression of minorities won't solve these problems, but intelligent governance based on ensuring the equality of all citizens will.