



ARĀK

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- i. *History.*
- ii. *Modern town and industry.*
- iii. *Basic population data, 1956-2011.*

i. History

Arāk was originally the popular name of Solţānābād, a town in western Iran, but is now the official name as well. It lies at 49° 41' east longitude and 34° 5' north latitude, 284 km southwest of Tehran. It is situated at an altitude of 1,800 m in the plain of Farāhān, on the edge of the Zagros massif, adjoining the extensive Tuzlu Kavīr salt flat. The importance of the town increased considerably with the completion, by 1938, of the railway line from the head of the Persian Gulf to Tehran (and then beyond); during the war years a fuel and water depot was established there. At present, Arāk falls administratively within Central province and has a largely Persian-speaking population; it is also the center of a *šahrestān* of the same name, with a total population of over 400,000. The modern spelling of the name *Arāk* hides an original form, 'Erāq, given to the region within the bend of the Qara-sū, south of Sāva and west of Qom; this form must stem ultimately from the designation 'Erāq-e 'Aĵam, current since Saljuq times for the whole of northwest Persia (ancient Media) as distinct from 'Erāq-e 'Arab (Mesopotamia). The present town was founded in



1223/1808 by the general Yūsof Khan Gorjī, who named it Solṭānābād; used as a base for the modernization of the Persian army, it was built on a regular, rectangular plan, with its walls protected by numerous towers. One of the town's famous sons was the Qajar poet and journalist Mīrzā Moḥammad Ṣādeq Adīb-al-mamālek Amīrī, born there in 1860.

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E. Dehgān, *Tārīk-e Arāk* I, Arāk, 1329 Š./1950; II, 1330 Š./1951.

Idem, *Gozāreš-nāma yā feqh al-loḡa-ye asāmī-e amkena: Dar maṭla‘e ketāb-e Korj-nāma yā tārīk-e Āstāna*, 1342 Š./1963.

Idem, *Kār-nāma yā do baḵš-e dīgar az tārīk-e Arāk: Tārīk-e Anjodān, sādāt-e Esmā‘īliya, wa fehrestvār-e waqāye‘-e šahrestān-e Arāk az 1281 [680] tā be ‘ašr-e ḥāžer*, Arāk, 1345Š./ 1966.

(C. E. Bosworth)

ii. Modern Town and Industry

The decline of sedentary life in medieval and early modern Iran led to a considerable shrinkage of the country's network of towns. At the beginning of the 19th century, when the western part of the central plateau lay open to incursions of Baḳtīārī tribesmen from the Zagros, not a single town remained in the area between Hamadān, Borūjerd, and Qom. In Fath-‘Alī Shah's reign efforts were made by the Qajar authorities to bring the area under control, and to this end, two new towns were founded in 1808/1223: Malāyer and Solṭānābād (now Arāk).

Solṭānābād was located by its founder, Yūsof Khan Gorjī, in the outer bastions of the Zagros facing the plateau, on a site where a valley opens onto the



southwestern piedmont of the plain of Farāhān, the center of which is occupied by a large *kavīr* (see the map of *qanāts* and inhabited places in the district in *Persia* [Geographical Handbook Series, Naval Intelligence Division], Oxford, 1945, p. 365). The inhabitants of three nearby villages were regrouped in this place and soon joined by other people from the district seeking security behind the high defensive wall which was built. Fortified with 12 to 18 towers on each side, the wall enclosed a rectangle of 2,000 x 2,666 feet. The town within the wall was strictly planned on a checkerboard pattern with a bazaar close to the central crossroads.

Soltānābād's population was approximately 3,000 when the dismissed chief minister, Mīrzā Āqā Khan Nūrī, was sent into exile there in 1860. Its rise to importance took place in the last quarter of the 19th century concurrently with the expansion of the carpet industry in response to the demands of European traders. Already in the mid-19th century this industry was being actively pursued by skilled workers in local villages, particularly around Farāhān; but in 1860 it was not yet being run on commercial lines to any significant extent (Brugsch, *Reise*, p. 13). The expansion began in the 1870s (according to a British report written in 1894, "nearly twenty years ago"), or perhaps not until 1882 (E. Lorini, *La Persia economica*, p. 200), when the Swiss trading house Ziegler & Co., which had its head office at Tabrīz and was opening branches at other Iranian centers, empowered a representative named Alpiger to establish a depot at Soltānābād. A large trading post and warehouse, covering approximately 40,000 sq. m and surrounded by a wall, came into being; known locally as the "castle" (*qaḷ'a*), it comprised staff quarters, storage sheds, and yarn-dyeing installations. In 1894 there were 1200 carpet looms in the town (as against 40 on Alpiger's arrival) and 1500 in nearby villages; according to another contemporary source, the number of looms in the whole district was 5000. The district then supplied the lion's share of Iranian carpet deliveries to Europe, which ranged from 4000 to 8000 pieces per annum exported via Tabrīz and Trebizond. Arāk continued to be Iran's most important center of commercial carpet production for export markets until at least 1940. The number of looms in the district immediately after the second world war was estimated at 12,000. In the bazaar, with its fine early 19th-century buildings close to the city center, carpet shops and warehouses still dominated much of the scene in the 1970s and showed every sign of prosperity.

Other factors also contributed to the town's growth. In the first place, the



construction of the Trans-Iranian Railway gave Arāk, where the line emerges from the Zagros ranges, a station of major importance. Also established in Reżā Shah's reign were some modern factories: a beet sugar refinery, vegetable oil and soap works, wool industries.

More recently Arāk was the location chosen for two state-owned enterprises, both opened in 1972: an aluminum smelter, built under the Regional Cooperation for Development program of the Central Treaty Organization with minority participation by the Reynolds company of the U.S.A. and the Pakistan government, and a heavy engineering plant, built with Soviet equipment and technical advice for which payment was made out of the proceeds of Iranian gas sales to the Soviet Union.

As the headquarters of a district (*šahrestān*) in the Central Province (Ostān-e Markazī), Arāk also acquired modern government functions and services. In 1356 Š./1978 plans to detach Tehran from the Central Province and make Arāk the provincial headquarters were announced.

All these factors drew in people from surrounding rural areas and made Arāk a substantial city. Its population rose from 71,925 in 1345 Š./1966 to 114,507 in 1355 Š./1976, i.e. at an annual rate of 4.7 percent, which greatly exceeded the country's rate of natural increase.

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(X. de Planhol)