



KARĀ'I

KARĀ'I (QARĀ'I, QARĀ TĀTĀR), a Turkic-speaking tribe of Azarbaijan, Khorasan, Kermān, and Fārs. As Vladimir Minorsky wrote, "The name of the Karā'i may in fact be connected with that of the famous Mongol tribe, the Kere'it, who, because of their Christian Nestorian faith, were imagined to be the good people of Prester John" (personal communication). But the name could also be connected with that of other ethnic groups in Central Asia (see Németh, pp. 264-68).

Sir John Malcolm claimed that the Karā'i of Persia "had come from Tartary with Timur," who "had settled part of them in Turkey and part in Khorassan." After the death of Timur (807/1405), "they had dispersed," and Nāder Shah (r. 1736-1747), "having desired to reassemble them," brought them together in Khorasan (II, p. 147). Although we do not know whether or not Timur brought the Karā'i to the Middle East, the rest of Malcolm's assertion seems to be substantially true.

There seem to have been Karā'i on both sides of the Aras river in Azarbaijan, at least for a century before 1148/1735. Adam Olearius, who traveled in Azarbaijan in 1638, mentions a tribe by the name of Karā'i on his list of the tribes of Moḡān (p. 28). In his *Tāriḵ-e jahān-gošā*, Moḡammad-Mahdi mentions two khans of Ganja, Fath-Karā'i and Eslām-Karā'i, who are said to have facilitated the surrender of that city to Nāder Shah in 1148/1735 (pp. 216-221). There are also two villages by the name of Karā'i in western Persian Azarbaijan, one in the *šahrestān* (county) of Orumiya and the other in the *šahrestān* of Mahābād (Razmārā, p. 350). But, after 1148/1735, nothing further



is heard about the Karā'ī of Azarbaijan. Therefore, one is tempted to believe that they were moved to Khorasan, like so many other tribes of Azarbaijan and Kurdistan, during that period.

The Karā'ī of Khorasan began to play an important role in the province when, in 1162/1749, their leader, Amir Khan, was put in charge of Mashad by the Afghan ruler Aḥmad Khan Dorrāni (q.v.; Yate, p. 53). But they reached the zenith of their power and influence under the leadership of Eshāq Khan Karā'ī at the beginning of the 19th century. Son of a mere servant of Najaf-'Ali Khan, the paramount chief of the Karā'ī tribe, he started his climb to power by illicitly building a fort in the small town of Torbat-e Ḥaydari. Then, after Najaf-'Ali Khan's murder, Eshāq Khan married his daughter and assumed the leadership of the tribe. By the end of the 18th century, Torbat-e Ḥaydari was the thriving capital of a large Karā'ī principality stretching from the gates of Mashad to Kāf, which Eshāq Khan ruled as a kind of enlightened monarch (Malcolm, II, pp. 146-50; Yate, pp. 52-56; Curzon, I, p. 203; Sykes, II, pp. 291, 314-15). In 1209/1795, Eshāq Khan submitted to [Āgā Moḥammad Khan Qājār](#) (Pakravan, pp. 197-98). But, under the more relaxed rule of [Fath-'Ali Shah](#) (1211-1249/1797-1834), he achieved almost total independence from the central government. In 1227/1813, he took advantage of a rising tide of resentment against Qājār rule in Khurasan to seize Mashad, along with the [Hazāras](#) and other discontented tribes, and to imprison the governor-general of the province, the Qājār prince Moḥammad-Wali Mirzā, in his own palace. However, soon thereafter, Eshāq Khan's tribal coalition began to unravel. He went to Tehran to plead his case, but to no avail, and in 1230/1816 both he and a son, Ḥasan-'Ali Khan, were strangled in Mašhad (Sepehr, p. 164; Fraser, pp. 25-29; Bellew, pp. 350-51).

Eshāq Khan was succeeded as paramount chief of the Karā'ī tribe by another son, Moḥammad Khan. In 1244/1829, he too took possession of Mashad, and, although he was finally defeated by another son of Fath-'Ali Shah, Aḥmad-'Ali Mirzā, he nonetheless “retained a sort of semi-independent existence, and never thoroughly acknowledged the authority of the Kajars” (Yate, p. 53; Sepehr, p. 247). But during the second half of the 19th century, the Karā'ī chiefs lost much of their power and wealth, and Torbat-e Ḥaydari its luster. When J.-P. Ferrier visited the area in 1260/1845, the town and its surroundings were still prosperous (p. 265). But, by the time George N. Curzon came in 1306/1889, the whole region had been “terribly decimated both by Turkmen ravages and by the great famine” (I, p. 203), and Yate, who passed by in 1310/1893, wrote that



Torbat-e Ḥaydari “presents a very tumble-down appearance,” the walls “now broken in all directions” (p. 54). For population estimates of the Karā’i of Khorasan, see M. L. Shiel (p. 400), H. Field (p. 253), and S. I. Bruk (p. 32). However, owing to the fact that, already in the 19th century, the tribe had become largely sedentary, such figures are highly conjectural.

There are also Karā’i in Kermān province. In 1957, they comprised some 420 households. Their summer quarter stretched from the Kāna Sorḳi mountain pass, on the Kermān-Sa’idābād (Sirjān) road, down to the neighborhood of Balvard. Their winter quarters were in the ‘Ayn-al-Baḡal region, across the salt lake from Sa’idābād. Their *tiras* (clans) were: Ṭelā Begi, Kurki, ‘Abbāsi, Beglari, Ḥaydari and Yār-Aḥmadi. The village of Tangu was their headquarters (Oberling, pp. 100-105).

Finally, there are several groups of Karā’i in Fars. There are clans by that name in the ‘Amala tribe of the Qašqā’i tribal confederacy, in the Eynāly (Inānlu) and Arab Jabbāra tribes of the Kamsa tribal confederacy, and in the Bakeš tribe of the Mamasāni tribal confederacy. Some Karā’i have also settled down in the *dehestān* of Sar Čahān, near Bavānat, and in the *dehestān* of Ābāda Tašk, near Neyriz. According to the Iranian Army Files (1956), the Karā’i of Kermān and Fars were moved there from Khorasan during Safavid times (Oberling, pp. 101-2).

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