



## KARAJ I. MODERN CITY

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### KARAJ

#### i. Modern City

In the present day, Karaj is a major suburb of Tehran. But until the second half of the 20th century, it was only known as a summer resort of the sub-district (*dehestān*) of Sāvoj Bolāq, along the road between Tehran and Qazvin, in the foothills of the [Alborz mountains](#). The large, modern industrial city with a population of 1.4 million in 2006 is built on a wide plain with some gentle hills, north of the rich agricultural plain of Šahriār and east of the plains of Sāvoj Bolāq and Haštgerd.

*Historical sketch.* The area of Karaj has been inhabited since the Bronze Age at Tepe Khurvin (Korvin; Van den Berghe, pp. 37 ff.), and the Iron Age at Kalāk on the left bank of the Karaj River (see Malekzādeh et al.). Under the Safavids, a large [caravansary](#) was built there, as well as a stone bridge that was, until the late 20th century, the main crossing into Karaj, since the river was often difficult to ford (Kleiss, 1996, p. 100).

During the Qajar period, Karaj was known mainly as a stage on the main road between Qazvin and Tehran. Most Western and Persian travelogues did not make extensive comments about this place—for example, “a prosperous village where the main highway from Qazvin to Tehran crosses a river of the same name” (Clapp, p. 70). In 1810, Solaymān Mirzā, once the prince governor of Kermānšāh, built the palace of Solaymāniya as a summer resort (Šaybāni,



pp. 66-108). It had four towers and was surrounded by gardens and walls, and the main reception room was decorated with two large paintings by ‘Abd-Allāh Khan Naqqāšbāši, depicting the shah with his relatives. This palace was described in 1860 by E. B. Eastwick (I, p. 217) as abandoned and used only as a shelter for travelers. Solaymāniya was later restored by Nāṣer-al-Din Shah. In 1917, the School of Farming, replacing the Moẓaffari Agricultural School (founded in 1900 in Tehran), was established in the large gardens and the last remaining buildings of Solaymāniya. Later, Reza Shah Pahlavi formally granted the place to the new Faculty of Agriculture of the University of Tehran (see [faculties of the university of tehran i](#)).

*Transit and industrial town.* The trans-Alborz caravan road to Čālus through the Karaj valley, built in the late Qajar period, was transformed into a modern highway. It linked Tehran to the Caspian Sea via the Kandovān tunnel, which was opened in 1938. Another major road passing through Karaj was the highway from Tehran to Gilān and Azarbaijan, the first major paved road built in Iran.

In the 1930s Karaj became a focal point for the new national policy of development. A large industrial estate (216 ha.) was designed for the south side of the village, near the railway station, as the “Industrial Model town of Karaj.” It was intended to house the first Iranian steel mills, which would benefit from the available water resources and the coal from the central Alborz (Šemšak and Zirāb). However, since the construction equipment coming from Germany was stopped by the British at the Suez Canal in 1940, the factory never materialized. The avenue leading to the Karaj industrial plant is still called “Dowb-e āhan” (Wezārat-e Kešvar, p. 230; Floor, 1984). Nevertheless, Karaj became a major industrial city with factories producing sugar, textiles, wire, and alcohol.

The first modern private industrial and housing compound in Karaj, Šahrak-e Jahānšahr, was built in the 1960s by Moḥammad-Šādeq Fāteḥ. The complex included textile, oil, and tea factories (Jahān Čit, Rowḡan-e Nabāti-e Jahān, Čāy-e Jahān), as well as housing for workers (Čahāršad-Dastgāh). Along the Tehran-Karaj-Qazvin artery, opened in 1968, the modern industrial zone remains the largest in the nation, with some 20 percent share of the national GDP (see Korby).

*Urban development.* The 25-year master plan, designed for Karaj in 1971 by Towse‘-e wa ‘Omrān Engineering Consultants to manage the development of



the city and protect its rural suburbs, was never implemented. However, private investment began to emerge because of the new opportunities resulting from the industrial projects and the land reform, which gave small lands to peasants and allowed large landowners to register, divide, and sell uncultivated lands for housing. These economic opportunities paved the way for various housing programs (*šahrak-sāzi*) by private or public operators and led to several informal settlements. The old cave homes of Kalāk on the left bank of the river were used by squatters coming from Sanandaj. The largest informal settlement was Tepe Morād Āb, a shantytown known also as Zurābād or Eslāmābād. New migrants, arriving mainly from Zanjān (34 percent) and Azarbaijan (23 percent), have settled there illegally since 1970; their struggle to stay on this hill close to the center of Karaj has become a frequent subject of social studies (e.g., Pārsāpažuh).

In 1976, several *šahraks* near Karaj became independent municipalities (*šahr*); they united again with Greater Karaj in 1996. South of the highway, railway, and metro that divide Karaj into two distinct sections are Mehršahr, an abortive residential luxury resort designed by the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation in the late 1960s, and Šahrak-e Fardis, a popular modern quarter close to the industrial facilities (Kasraie). Between the two resorts, the large agricultural area of Meškindašt lies outside the municipal limits of Karaj. In the north, the villages that have integrated into Greater Karaj are Hešārak (with the Razi Vaccine and Serum Research Institute), Gowhardašt (renamed Rejā'i Šahr), built in the foothills for new middle class migrants, and Šahrak-e 'Aẓimiya, where numerous Kurdish refugees expelled from Iraq in 1971 were settled. Because of the better environmental and cheaper housing conditions, Karaj has become a major area of new residences for middle class households from Tehran.

A new, detailed urban plan was designed in 1977, but no urban policy was in effect during the Islamic Revolution and the [Iran-Iraq War](#) (1980-88), when the city unabatedly expanded with the arrival of many refugees from Khuzestan and Kurdistan. In 1989 a new master plan was proposed, and the detailed plan was approved in 1993, but the new urban policy only began with the first elected city council in 1999, within the framework of the new regional development program for Greater Tehran established by the Housing Ministry. About 2,000 ha of agricultural lands were illegally built upon during 1979-97. A new master plan for the city, designed by Bāvand Urban Planners, was approved in 2008, but numerous conflicts over land property has made its



implementation problematic (Bāvand Urban Planners files, unpublished).

The modern city of Karaj, divided into ten districts in 1997, measures 15,699 ha, including built-up land (4,200 ha), rural and green areas (700 ha), and arid zones (1,714 ha). This heterogeneous city is still expanding around the old city center, which is being renovated, while the satellites (*šahraks*) are poorly connected (Amiri). Accessibility to Tehran is well developed, with a metro line since 1998, but the transportation system within Karaj is inadequate. An airport, built near Mehršahr in the mid-1970s for the postal service, has only freight activity. Large estates have been given to various universities in order to link higher education to local industries, and several large facilities, including a national prison, hospitals, and sporting amenities have been built. Nonetheless Karaj has few cultural and social activities for a population with social and educational levels comparable to Tehran (see below, ii). The ethnic, cultural, and economic heterogeneity of the population with little socio-cultural cohesion presents a major challenge for the future of the city.

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