

# The National Flag of Turkmenistan of 1992

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Jiří Tenora

The national flag of Turkmenistan approved on 19 February 1992 is one of the most interesting national flags in the world. (Fig. 1) The flag is

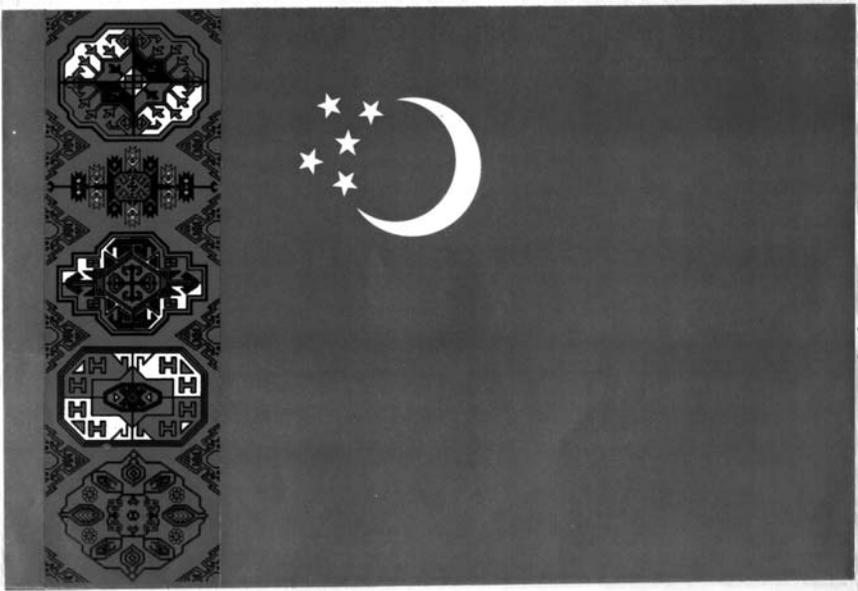


Fig. 1. National Flag of Turkmenistan of 1992

officially referred to in Russian as a state flag, but it is in reality a national flag because the Russian expression for state flag means a flag of a sovereign state, not of a member of a federation. According to the provisions of the 1992 Flag Act, the flag is to be flown on governmental buildings, residences, and on sea and river vessels.<sup>1</sup> The Flag Information Code grid pattern for

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<sup>1</sup>The Flag Act of the Republic of Turkmenistan (19 Feb. 1992) (see Appendix).

the flag would, therefore, be .<sup>2</sup>

The flag differs conspicuously from the classical European models with two or three horizontal or vertical color stripes.<sup>3</sup> However, the use of green as the primary color and the white crescent-and-five-stars emblem are not unusually rare, especially for an Islamic country. The color green and variations of the white crescent-and-stars emblem are also found in the same region on the flags of the Comoros, the Maldives, and Pakistan, and somewhat farther away on the flag of Mauritania. As we shall see, none of these flags has influenced the design of the national flag of Turkmenistan.

This article does not attempt to address all flags that have flown on the territory of the present-day Turkmenistan.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the article consists of three sections: (1) The Flag Act and the flag geometry, (2) the “guls” and their colors, and (3) the symbolism of the flag.

## The Flag Act and the Flag Geometry

The original text of the 1992 Flag Act exists in both Turkmenian and Russian, which is also an official language of the country. Although there is also an official English translation, The Flag Cabinet of Berlin has rendered an unofficial English translation in more natural language. (See Appendix.)

In order to discern the legislative intent in the construction of the symbols, it is necessary to read the text of the Flag Act very carefully. The Flag Act provides most of the necessary information to construct the crescent and to place the stars in their proper position. The official drawing of the flag (Figs. 2 and 3) shows the proportions of the green and crimson-red fields as well as the geometry of the white emblem. The only missing parameter is the diameter of the imaginary circles that contain the stars. Here the official drawing helps to a certain extent; a diameter equal to one-tenth of the diagonal of an imaginary square around the white emblem, which also

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<sup>2</sup>See Whitney Smith, “The Flag Information Code,” *The Flag Bulletin* 21 (1982): 35. In “Section V: National Flag Typology,” the author explains the system of a 6-places grid, using dots in various spaces to denote private, public, or military use (three vertical columns, left to right) as well as use on land (upper horizontal row) and use at sea (lower horizontal row). This code was adopted by the International Federation of Vexillological Associations (FIAV) as a standard in flag identification and description.

<sup>3</sup>See Whitney Smith, “New Symbols, Names, and State Structures in the Former USSR,” *The Flag Bulletin* 31 (1992): 236–238.

<sup>4</sup>For more information on Turkmenistan and its general area, see Walter Trembicky, “Flags of Non-Russian Peoples under Soviet Rule,” *The Flag Bulletin* 8 (1969): 120–126. This includes descriptions of the flags of the Kokand autonomous state, Bukhara, Bukharan Social People’s Republic, Turkestan, and Alash Orda state.

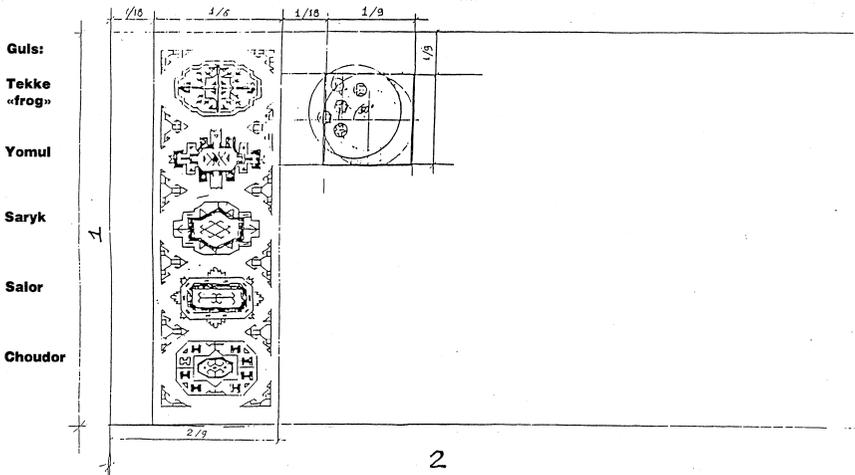


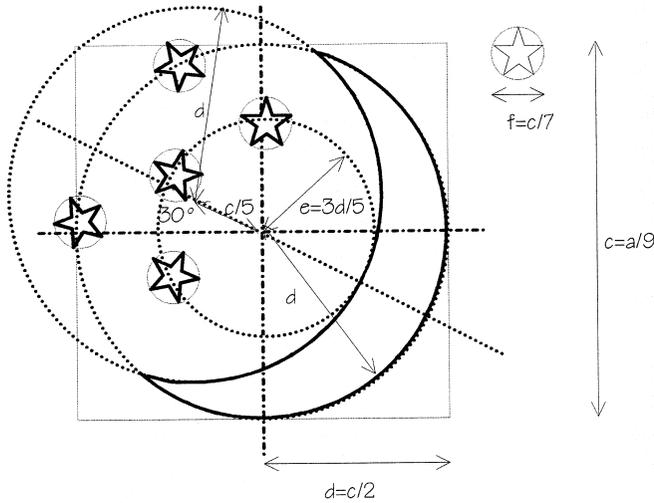
Fig. 2. Proportions of the national flag (official drawing) and location of carpet medallions (“guls”)

corresponds to one-seventh of the length of one of the square’s sides, appears to be a reasonable means of calculating the diameter of the imaginary circles.

There is also a discrepancy between the description in the Flag Act of the position of the three stars on the imaginary inner circle and the position of the three stars in the official drawing. The unofficial English translation describes the position of the three stars on the imaginary inner circle as follows: “The other three stars are arrayed on a second circle, the distance from the first one being  $\frac{1}{16}$  the diameter of the crescent.” It would be better to define this inner circle as having a diameter of either (1) three-fifths of the length of one of the square’s sides or (2) three-fifths of the diameter of the imaginary outer circle (the length of one of the square’s sides and the diameter of the imaginary outer circle is the same).

## The “Guls” and Their Colors

Only a native Turkmenian can fully understand the text of the Flag Act in the original Turkmenian. Although the description of the flag in English is fairly accurate, there are two significant problems in interpreting the following quote from the Act: “The [crimson-red] stripe bears on the vertical axis five main carpet medallions (‘guls’) in traditional colors, each of them framed with a carpet ornament.” A non-Turkmenian is unable to interpret this sentence. Why? He or she knows neither the main carpet medallions nor



- a = width of the flag
- b = length of the flag
- $c = a/9 = b/18$  = side of the conceived square with white emblems
- $c/5$  = distance between the centers of the outer and inner circles giving shape to the crescent
- $d = c/2$  = radius of the outer circle of the crescent bearing 2 stars
- $e = 3d/5$  = radius of the inner circle bearing 3 stars
- $f = c/7$  = supposed diametre of the circles containing the stars

Fig. 3. Geometry of the white emblem

their traditional colors.

Figures 4 to 8 show typical products of the local carpet weavers. Figure 4 is a Tekke carpet with a Gushly gul design; figure 5 is a two-sided carpet; figure 6 is a carpet containing a portrait of Soviet Marshall S. M. Budionny; and figures 7 and 8 are Tekke “chuvals” with Kejebe gul and Salor gul designs, respectively. “Chuval” is the Turkmenian term for a large carpet bag with strings and knots, which is used to store household items such as clothes.

“The composition of such carpet has characteristic features: the central field contains major patterns (‘guls’) that are limited by the borders, the pattern of which differs from that of the central field. The designs of the Turkmenian carpets have a clear geometric pattern and noble color, with a

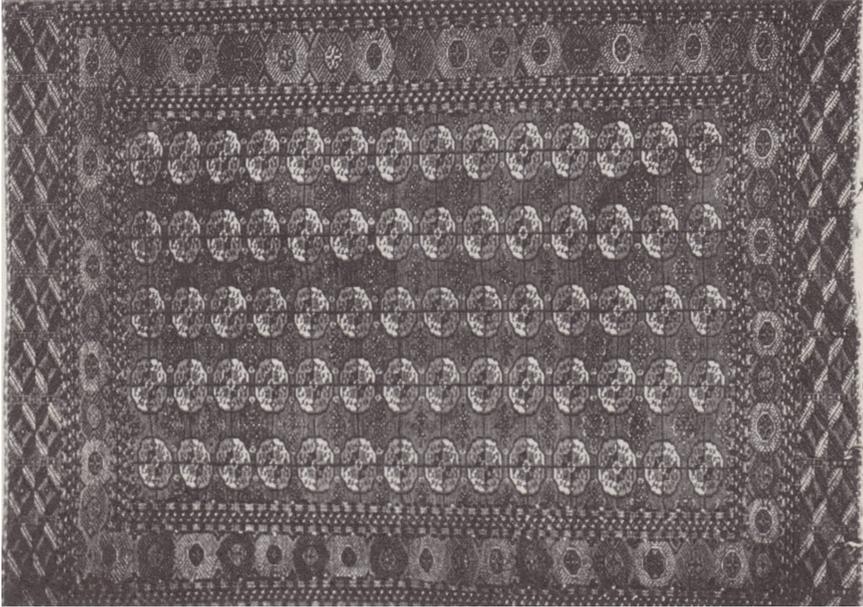


Fig. 4. Tekke carpet with Gushly gul design

prevailing red tone.”<sup>5</sup> Typical colors used in Turkmenian carpets are red, black, orange, white, yellow, and brown.

The following quotation discusses the carpet medallions or guls: “The main elements making up the traditional design of a Turkmen carpet are the major and minor ‘guls’ — the medallions of the central field — and the parallel border bands. Wider bands, or ‘elems,’ displaying a different pattern, run along both ends of a carpet, thus completing its overall design. ‘Guls’ are placed either in regular rows or in checkered order. Their design is based on floral forms or elements of the ‘tamghi,’ ancient tribal signs that included representations of birds of prey — the protectors of the tribe. In the past, every tribe had its own ‘gul’ emblem: thus, there was the Salor ‘gul,’ the Tekke ‘gul,’ the Saryk ‘gul,’ the Yomul ‘gul,’ the Choudor ‘gul,’ and others.”<sup>6</sup>

With an understanding of Turkmenian carpet design, it is possible to conclude that the guls of the national flag are as follows (from top to bottom): the Tekke gul, the Yomul gul, the Saryk gul, the Salor gul, and the

<sup>5</sup>N. Dovodov and N. Khodzhamukhamedov, *Carpets and Carpet Products of Turkmenistan* (Ashkhabad: N.p., 1983), 21.

<sup>6</sup>L. Beresneva, *The Decorative and Applied Art of Turkmenia* (Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1976), 6–7.

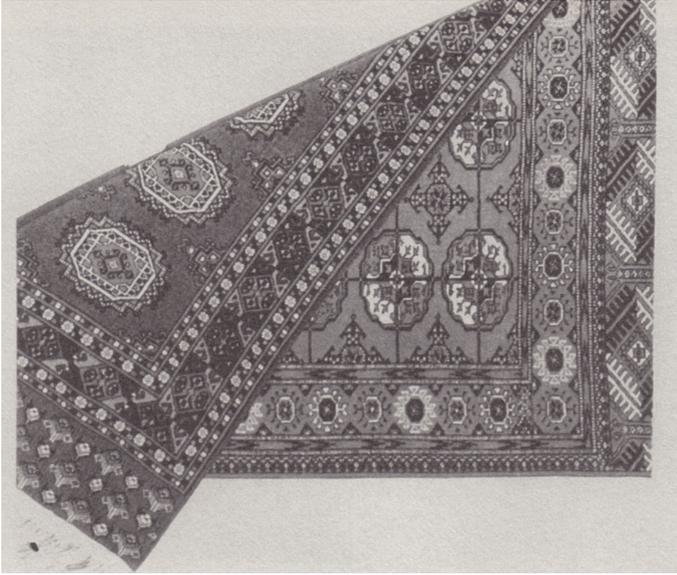


Fig. 5. Two-sided carpet (see both patterns)

Choudor gul. These five guls do not symbolize the most important ruling tribes in Turkmenistan, but instead they are simply the most beautiful and characteristic elements of the Turkmenian carpets.

Some may question why a carpet design is displayed on the national flag of Turkmenistan. The answer is simply that carpets play a special role in the life of the Turkmenian people.

Because the author is neither a carpet specialist nor a Turkmenian historian, the following quotations explain the significance of the carpet in Turkmenian life:

Traditions of carpet-weaving have a multi-centuries history. The Italian traveller Marco Polo was the first to mention the Turkmen carpets in the XIII century.<sup>7</sup>

Carpets and carpet-making had been caused by the necessities of the nomadic life. They served not only as floor-covering and substituted furniture, but satisfied the aesthetic needs of the people as well. Carpet products. . . were designed for clothing, as well as for transportation of various household paraphernalia, substituting for sacks and bags. Carpet products decorated

<sup>7</sup>Dovodov and Khodzhamukhamedov, *Carpets*, 20.



Fig. 6. Carpet portrait of Soviet Marshall S. M. Budionny

camels, horses, nomadic tents, and wedding processions. The everyday uses of carpet products stipulated their form.<sup>8</sup>

Even the coat of arms of the former Turkmenian Soviet Socialist Republic showed a piece of carpet with a gul, in this case it was the so-called Yomal gul. (See Fig. 9.) Although the coat of arms contained items characteristic of Soviet heraldry (red five-pointed star, hammer and sickle, rising sun, oil derrick, plants, cotton bolls, and ears of grain), the local communists did not abandon this important national symbol.

The following quotations explain the significance of the traditional colors of Turkmenian carpets:

Vegetable dyes, mostly of local origin, were used until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Madder root, for instance,

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<sup>8</sup>Dovodov and Khodzhamukhamedov, *Carpets*, 20.



Fig. 7. Tekke chuval with Kejebe gul design

was the dyestuff which gave a variety of reds, from pink to deep cherry and reddish-violet. Yellow was obtained from buckthorn berries as well as from sary-chop grass. Beige and brown were obtained from the pomegranate rind, green from copper filing, treated sour milk, or vinegar. Some dyes, such as cochineal and indigo, were imported and therefore used sparingly, their price being rather high.<sup>9</sup>

The color scheme of Turkmen rugs is noble and restrained. Red is the basic color, appearing in many hues, ranging from bright scarlet, the color of poppies in bloom, to deep cherry and violet-brown. Added to it are touches of yellow, dark green, dark blue, navy blue, and white. The outlines are in navy blue or somber brown, occasionally in black. Since the natural color of the wool is a warm creamy white, the white parts do not clash with the general color scale.<sup>10</sup>

The basic design of the Turkmenian flag allows for variations in the guls. The Flag Information Code symbol for a flag variant should therefore be

<sup>9</sup>Beresneva, *Decorative and Applied Art*, 6.

<sup>10</sup>Beresneva, *Decorative and Applied Art*, 6.



Fig. 8. Tekke chugal with Salor gul design

used, *i.e.*, (□). This symbol indicates the use of one of two or more variants of the same basic design.<sup>11</sup> Figure 10 shows another Turkmenian flag with guls of a rather different form.<sup>12</sup>

## The Symbolism of the Flag

The color green and the white crescent and stars are undoubtedly Islamic symbols. After a long period of philosophical materialism as the Turkmen SSR, a Union Republic of the USSR, like many of its fellow republics experiencing a reawakening nationalism and a rediscovery of traditional religion, the country returned to its historical roots, finding expression in older, non-Soviet symbols.<sup>13</sup> The carpet patterns in traditional colors underline the national identity of the new state.

The half-moon can only be a waxing one. It is interesting to point out that the horns of the crescent are facing the hoist and not the fly, as they usually are on Islamic flags, *e.g.*, Algeria, Pakistan, Tunisia, and Turkey. A possible explanation is that the Turkmenians, influenced by the long Soviet

<sup>11</sup>See Whitney Smith, *Flags Through the Ages and Across the World* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975), 207.

<sup>12</sup>This flag was a gift of Mr. Karl-Heinz Hesmer; the origin of the flag is unknown.

<sup>13</sup>Alexander Basov, "Vlajka Turkmenistanu," *Vexilologie* 85 (1992): 1668–70. Basov maintains the flags of the ancestors were also green.



Fig. 9. Note the use of the Yomal gul in the coat of arms of the former Turkmenian Soviet Socialist Republic.

era, view the flag from the obverse with European, not Islamic, eyes.<sup>14</sup> Figure 10 shows the "normal" obverse, and in this case the moon has the form of the waxing crescent. A crescent is always a positive sign; it is an expression of faith in a bright future.

The symbolism of the stars is a little more complicated, combining both traditional and modern ideas. Their number, five, represents the five main preconditions of life on Earth—light, sound, taste, smell, and feeling. Each point of each star also stands for a state of matter: solid, liquid, gas, crystal, and plasma.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

The national flag of Turkmenistan conveys a complicated, intricate design. This is one example when knowledge of the text of a flag act proves insufficient in comprehending all details of a design. But for all flags, vexillologists

<sup>14</sup>For several decades the Turkmenians have been writing from left to right, the reverse for people writing in Arabic.

<sup>15</sup>Basov, "Vlajka Turkmenistanu." He excerpted the symbolism for the stars from two newspapers: *Turkmenkaya Iskra* 8 Feb., 4 Mar., 9 Mar. 1992; *Izvestiya* 23 Mar. 1992.



Fig. 10. Variant of the national flag of Turkmenistan

need to explore the designs as they lead us back to deeper understanding of the societies that fly them. In assessing this complex symbol, we develop not only a richer appreciation for a truly fascinating flag, but also a sensitivity for the history, culture, and concerns of an ethnic group too often overlooked by Western European and American scholars in the past.

## **Appendix: Law of Turkmenistan**

### **“On the State Flag of Turkmenistan”**

1. The State Flag of Turkmenistan shall be the symbol of unity and independence of the nation.
2. The State Flag of Turkmenistan shall consist of a rectangular cloth. The proportions of width to length shall be 1:2.

The flag shall be green. Along the hoist shall be a vertical crimson-red stripe; width  $\frac{1}{6}$  of the length of the flag, distance from the hoist  $\frac{1}{18}$  of the length of the flag. This stripe bears on the vertical axis five main carpet medallions (guls) in traditional colors, each of them framed with a carpet ornament.

On the greater field in the left upper corner shall be placed a white crescent and five white five-pointed stars, inserted in a supposed square with a side equalling  $\frac{1}{9}$  of the length of the flag. The distance between the crimson-red stripe and the left side of the square shall be  $\frac{1}{18}$  of the length of the flag. The distance between the top edge of the cloth and the top side of the square shall be  $\frac{1}{9}$  of the width of the flag.

The crescent shall be placed in the square at an angle of 30 relative to the horizontal axis of the square from right to left. The center of the periphery of the crescent shall be placed on the point of intersection of both axes of the square. The center of the inner circle of the crescent shall be placed on a supposed straight line passing the center of the square at an angle of 30 relative to the horizontal axis of the square. The stars shall be arranged on two circles on the left side of the crescent.

The outer circle of the stars is identical with the circle of the crescent and bears two equidistant stars. The other three stars are arranged on a second circle, the distance from the first one being  $\frac{1}{16}$  the diameter of the crescent.

3. The State Flag of Turkmenistan shall be flown on buildings of the Presidential Palace, of the Supreme Soviet (Council), of the Government and of local Soviets of People's Deputies — constantly; on buildings where sessions of local Soviets of People's Deputies take place — throughout the entire period of the session; on buildings of ministries, State Committees, organs of the State power and offices of Turkmenistan, enterprises, institutions and organizations as well as on residential dwellings on national holidays and at other festive events; on buildings of diplomatic, consular and other representations of Turkmenistan abroad — constantly; on sea and river vessels, other means of transportation on which are situated in their capacity as officials: the President, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, diplomatic and other official representatives of Turkmenistan, as well as in other cases — on instruction confirmed by the government. Other circumstances and opportunities of use of the State Flag shall be provided by acts of law and government decrees.
4. The State Flag of Turkmenistan and its representations, irrespective of their dimensions, shall always accurately correspond to the color and schematic drawings appended to the present law.

5. An instruction concerning the application of Article 3 of the present law shall be approved by the government of Turkmenistan.

The President of Turkmenistan S. Niyazov  
Ashkhabad, 19 February 1992 Stamp of the General Division  
No. 653-XII

## **Acknowledgments**

The author wishes to thank Mr. Josef Cesak and Dr. Wolfgang Jilek for the supervision of the English text of the lecture on which this article was based, and Mr. Murad Nuryagdiev, Deputy Chief of the Department for Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, for the official texts of the 1992 Flag Act.

