



FLAGS II. OF AFGHANISTAN

FLAGS

ii. OF AFGHANISTAN

The Kingdom of Afghanistan. Almost nothing is known about the flags of Afghanistan during the reign of the Sadōzay dynasty and the early decades of the Moḥammadzay dynasty. Traditionally, nonstandard flags of different colors were used in wars. In the reign of Amir Dōst Moḥammad (1819-63) and Šēr ‘Alī Khan (1863-79; see [AFGHANISTAN x](#)) there existed triangular, red and green military flags bearing the words of the Islamic confession of faith (*šahāda*) as well as the names of the four caliphs and verses from the Qur’ān relating to *jehād* “holy war,” all in white color (Gubar et al., p. 99-100; for illustrations depicting scenes of Anglo-Afghan battles with Afghans holding military flags, see, e.g., Roskoschny, pp. 20, 28, 308-9; Adamec, pp. 153, 198). The earliest Afghan flag shown in vexillological books of the 19th century has green-white-green horizontal stripes (*Flaggen-Almanack*, Hamburg, n.d. [1940s?]). A similar flag is illustrated under “Kauff. Afghanistans” (Afghanistan merchant flag) in the chart *Official-Atlas aller Standdarten Kriegschiff...und Handerlflaggen*, Bremen, n.d. (ca. 1948; see also note by W. Smith in Gubar et al., p. 99).

In the reign of Amir ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Khan (r. 1880-1901), black became the standard color of the royal/national flag. Contemporary stamps and coins reveal the formation of a modern coat of arms which became a persistent symbol on the national flags for coming decades: a temple/mosque flanked by



two flags, inside of which are a *mehrāb* (prayer niche) and *menbar* (pulpit). The arms were surrounded by muskets, sabres, cannon, and it appears in white on the black flag (“Bayraq”). This arms appeared on the national flag (PLATE IX a) used during the reign of Amir Ḥabīb-Allāh (1901-19). Nevertheless, there were a number of other, military and civilian, flags in use, especially by the members of royal family. The royal flag had a red field bearing the name of the king in a white *ṭogrā* (Gubar et al.; Smith; cf. “Bayraq”).

After the War of Independence of 1919, King Amān-Allāh (r. 1919-29; q.v.) abolished all personal and civilian flags as a gesture of the centralization of the nation’s power. The new flag (PLATE IX b) added the royal shako (*kolāh*) on the top of a somewhat differently stylized mosque, now topped by a dome, and two crossed swords beneath. The whole was placed within a circle (at times an oval; see “Bayraq”) surrounded by rays forming an eight-pointed star, which may have been imitated from the similar pattern featured in the royal flag of the Ottoman Empire (Smith, p. 352, n. 2). Similar arms were in use as early as 1912 (on the coins; see Smith, p. 352, n. 3) and their rendition on the flag varied in detail, e.g., cannon barrels or rifles were substituted for the swords (cf. the Afghan national flag appearing on the cover of the booklet titled *Afġānestān ḥokmodārānenek mamlakatmazī zīāratlarī kāṭeralarī*, published following King Amān-Allāh’s visit to Turkey in 1928, where an open book, apparently the Qur’ān, appeared immediately above the swords). This flag, though not mentioned in the first constitution of Afghanistan (1923), may be regarded as the first “national” flag of the country, as it was the first to gain international recognition.

Another version of the emblem was introduced in 1926 on coins, stamps, and occasionally appeared on the national flag (PLATE IX c), which omitted the shako, weapons, and the surrounding eight-pointed star, but which framed the central mosque from below with a crescent-shaped wreath (Sykes, II, pp. 304-306; Smith, p. 342). This emblem appears to have had quite limited usage during Amān-Allāh’s reign, yet it was the prototype of the coat of arms in use during 1931-74 (see below). The flags of the army, called *‘Alam-e mobāarak*, were also black, both sides of which were crowded with religious inscriptions and the phrase *Dawlat-e ‘ellīya-ye mostaqella-ye Afġānestān* “The exalted independent Government of Afghanistan” (PLATE IX d; “Bayraq”; for illustrations see Gubar et al, pp. 102-4).

On 2 September 1928, the *lōya jerga*, the national tribal assembly, approved a



new national flag that had three vertical stripes of black, red, and green, with a new coat of arms consisting of two sheaves of wheat, a chain of golden mountains, and a star and rising sun (PLATE IX e; cf. a reconstructed illustration of the arms shown in *Vexilla Nostra*, no. 91, Sept.-Oct. 1977, p. 49, which includes the word *Afġānestān* on a ribbon). This flag not only replaced the religious symbolism of the former flags by a modern arms but also adopted the conventional tricolor background, typical of European national flags since the French Revolution. Even Amān-Allāh's interpretation of colors was inconsistent with the traditional concepts: "In the new flag, black represents our past, red the blood shed for the independence, and green is a symbol of wealth and hopes for the future" (*New York Times*, 5 September 1928). The flag was indeed a clear expression of the lofty reforms proposed by the king following his European trip. The flag, like the reforms, had a short life and was abolished in January 1929, when the king abdicated. The civil war that broke out brought to power Ḥabīb-Allāh Bačča-ye Saqqā (q.v.), who restored the 1919-26 national flag during his short rule.

Nāder Shah's (1929-33) policy of moderate reforms was reflected in the flag he reportedly used when he seized power (PLATE IX f; Gordon, p. 218; Wheeler-Holohan, 1933). It was the tricolor flag introduced by Amān-Allāh just a year before, now bearing the old coat of arms surrounded by an eight-pointed star in white. The arms, however, was soon modified as a bound sheaf of wheat circling a stylized representation of a mosque, which also recalls the architectural characteristics of the mausoleum of Aḥmad Shah Dorrānī (q.v.) in Qandahār. Below was the name *Afġānestān* in *nask* script and the date 1348 (1929, the year Nāder Shah seized power; see Afghanistan Ministry of Information and Culture, p. 11). Another interpretation proposed later on that year was the date of the adoption of the flag itself (see e.g. "The Afghan Flag," *Afghanistan News* 4, December 1960, p. 17). The flag was described in Article 4 of the Constitution of 1931 and was reconfirmed in the Constitution of 1964, in which the proportions of 2:3 were legally specified. The flag remained similar during the long, stable reign of Moḥammad-Ẓāher Shah (1933-73); yet as presented in various illustrations, the white coat of arms sometimes encroached on the black and green stripes (PLATE IX g), but, most often, it was contained entirely within the middle red stripe. There have been different interpretations of these colors; e.g. the black stands for the religious and historical heritage of the country, the red for the national struggle for independence, and the green for peace, hope, progress and prosperity (Afghanistan Ministry of Information and Culture, pp. 4-5; cf. *Encyclopedia*



Americana II, 1966, p. 322).

Meanwhile, the Afghan tribes residing in the Northeastern Frontier Province of Pakistan had been using various flags as symbol of their struggle for uniting with Afghanistan. Photographs in a booklet entitled *Paštūnestān* and authored by a certain Bēnavā (in the late 1940s?) exhibit flags used by various Pathan groups: usually with a white inscription in *nask* script reading *Allāh akbar*, *Paštūnestān*, or *Paštūnestān zenda bād*, on a red background. In various years of the 1960s and 1970s, the Afghan government issued a set of postage stamps commemorating the idea of Paštūnestān. The flag (PLATE IX h) is red with a seal on a black vertical stripe, surrounded by the inscription *Allāh akbar* and *Paštūnestān*. The circular seal is blue, circumscribed by a white band, with three green, snow-tipped mountain peaks, behind which rises an eleven-rayed sun (Smith et al.). A flag with a different design was introduced ca. 1985 for the putative Paštūnestān.

Republic of Afghanistan. As Afghanistan became a republic under Moḥammad Dāwūd Khan (1973-78; q.v.) following a coup d'état, a new national flag was introduced on 9 May 1974, in which the same national colors were arranged horizontally (PLATE X a). In the upper hoist was a new coat of arms in gold and brown: a stylized eagle bearing on its breast the combined *meḥrāb* and pulpit from the former emblems; thus the religious element still present, but shrunken considerably. The eagle was said to have lived in the lofty mountains of the country and symbolized its sovereignty. The wreath of wheat-ears represented the occupation of most of the citizens, i.e., agriculture. The ribbon now bore the Pashto title *Da Afḡānestān jomhūrīyat* "The Republic of Afghanistan" and the date of the republican coup d'état, 26 Čongāš (Saraṭān; see CALENDAR iii) 1352 (17 July 1973). The colors of the flag were now interpreted as follows: black (top) as representative of the historical national flag which was used particularly in the third Anglo-Afghan war in 1919 (q.v.); the red (middle) as a symbol of valor and sacrifice; the green, occupying the lower half of the flag, as prosperity ("The Flag Law in Afghanistan," *Afghanistan* 27/1, Spring 1974, pp. 1-11.) Another interpretation of the colors was the progress from the dark times of the past to prosperity, and of the eagle as representing the legendary bird who brought the wheat crown to Jamšīd, the first king of Ārīānā (i.e., ancient Afghanistan; Barraclough and Crampton, pp. 188-89; *The Flag Bulletin* 13/2, 1974, pp. 31ff.), and—ironically for a republic—the first Afghan king, Aḥmad Shah Dorrānī (W. Smith, *Flags and Arms Across the World*, New York, n.d. [ca. 1980], p. 16).



Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. After the revolution of 27 April 1978 a red flag with a golden emblem on the upper hoist was adopted (PLATE X b), apparently after the Soviet example. The five-pointed star at the top of the emblem was said by the Marxist government (of Ḥafīz-Allāh Amīn, leader of the Ḳalq faction of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan [PDPA]) to stand for the five main “nationalities” of the country. In the center was inscribed *ḳalq* “masses” in *nasta'liq* script. The Pashto words on the ribbon read: *Da Tawr enqelāb 1357 da Afġānestān demōkrātk jomhūrīyat* “The April revolution 1357 (Š./1978) of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan” (“Hoisting the Red flag,” *The Kabul Times*, 19 October 1978, p. 2; see also the three articles on the flag in the 19 October 1979 issue of the newspaper); *Flaggenmitteilung*, no. 26, Oct. 1978; *The Flag Bulletin* 18/1, 1979, pp. 3-7).

Another coup d'état on 27 December 1979 brought to power Babrak Kārmal, who belonged to the rival Parčam “flag” faction of the ruling PDPA, and who tried to dissociate his administration from the atheistic position taken by his predecessor. In his flag inauguration speech (“The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan's Tricolor Flag Reflects the Will [and] Traditions of Our People,” *Afghanistan* 33/1, Spring 1980, pp. 1-7), Kārmal did his best to draw on religious, patriotic, and historical values in order to interpret the new flag, which was essentially the revival of the traditional black-red-green flag (PLATE X c). The black now represented the banner of Abū Moslem (q.v.), who had led a revolt in Khorasan (interpreted as the medieval word for Afghanistan) against the Omayyad caliphs. The red color was said to be that of the Ghaznavids, the rulers of the first local Islamic dynasty, who, as *ġāzīs* “religious warriors,” carried Islam into the Indian subcontinent. Green was said to be a general color for all Muslims. The new emblem which appeared on the top hoist and was surrounded by wreaths of wheat (an element of former flags) consisted of an open book, under the familiar icon of the *meḥrāb* and pulpit, a rising sun, and, above all, a five-pointed star flanked by two segments of a gear (representing industry; *The Flag Bulletin* 19/6, 1980, pp. 331-36). Through its traditional symbolism, the new flag signified the sovereignty of the country and especially its independence from the Soviet Union.

This emblem was modified under Najīb-Allāh, whose National Front government tried to separate itself from the Marxist ideology of the Party (PLATE X d). Thus the word “democratic” was dropped from the official name of the republic, as the red star and the book (which had been identified as a symbol of scientific and cultural revolution; *ibid*) was eliminated from the coat



of arms (*Constitution of the Republic of Afghanistan* [of 30 November 1987], Kabul, n.d., p. 5). The ruling party (PDPA), however, adopted a red flag with a golden cogwheel surrounding an ear of wheat in the upper hoist—apparently to appease the secular feelings of its members (“Republic of Afghanistan,” *The Flag Bulletin* 27/6, 1988, pp. 204-15).

Islamic Afghanistan. On 28 April 1992 when Islamic rebels took Kabul and the civil war began among the rival factions, forces in Kabul used a flag of three equal horizontal stripes in green, white, and black (top to bottom), substituting white for the red color of previous flags. The flag was made official in December 1992 with the inscription: *Allāh akbar* (top stripe), *lā elāh ellā Allāh Moḥammad Rasūl Allāh* (middle stripe; [PLATE X e](#); *The Flag Bulletin*, no. 151, 1993, p. 88).

But the inscription was soon incorporated into and replaced by a coat of arms which now stands in gold in the center of the flag ([PLATE X f](#)). This new emblem resembled that used by the royal family: a mosque (stylized somewhat differently) flanked by two flags appears in the center above the date 1771 [Š./1992]. It was framed by sheaves of wheat circled by a ribbon. The name of the state appeared in the bottom in Pashto: *Da Afġānestān eslāmī dawlat*. The two crossed sabers which encircled the bottom and sides, of the emblem were new design elements (*The Flag Bulletin* 32/1, 1993, no. 153, p. 176). The individual groups of the Islamic coalition had their own flag (*Flaggen mitteilungen*, no. 213, pp. 2-3).

The Ṭālebān, who captured Kabul after a lengthy siege in September 1996, had long been operating under a plain white flag. The words of the *šahāda* in green were added to it, and it was used as a national flag possibly in October 1997, simultaneously with the change in the name of the country to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (*The Flag Bulletin* 36/5, 1997, pp. 184-85).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

L. W. Adamec, *Dictionary of Afghan Wars, Revolutions, and Insurgencies*,



Lanham, Md., 1996.

Afghanistan Ministry of Information and Culture, *The Afghan Flag*, Kabul, 1968.

E. M. C. Barraclough and W. G. Crampton, eds., *Flags of the World*, London, 1978.

“Bayraq,” in *Dā’erat al-ma’āref-e Ārīānā* IV, Kabul, 1962, pp. 3304-7.

Ġ.-M. Ġobār (Gubar), “Bayraq dar Afġānestān,” *Ārīānā* 1/9, 1321 Š./1942.

W. J. Gordon, *Flags of the World*, London, 1930.

G.-M. Gubar et al., “A History of the Symbols of Afghanistan,” *The Flag Bulletin* 6/3, 1967, pp. 91-105.

P. C. Lux-Wurm, “A Vexillological Tour of Afghanistan,” *The Flag Bulletin* 18/1, 1979, pp. 17-20.

H. Roskoschny, *Afghanistan und feine nacharlander*, Leipzig, n.d. (ca. early 1900s).

W. Smith, “National Flags of Modern Afghanistan,” *The Flag Bulletin* 19/6, 1980, pp. 337-59.

W. Smith, T. Greene, and L. Loynes, “Flags of Hope: Pakhtunistan,” *The Flag Bulletin* 4/2, 1965, pp. 32-33.

P. Sykes, *A History of Afghanistan*, 2 vols., London, 1940.

V. Wheeler-Holohan, *Manual of Flags*, London, 1933.