The ARM Instruction Set Architecture

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Abstract

The ARM processor is a 32-bit Reduced Instruction Set Computer (RISC), a microprocessor that recognises a limited number of instructions. An advantage of RISC microprocessors is that they can execute instructions relatively quickly since the instructions are elementary. RISC chips also require fewer transistors and other components, making both RND and manufacturing more cost-efficient. This architecture is significantly different from other CISC (Complex instruction set computer) microprocessors and has been primarily designed for use in embedded systems. In this report, the ARM Instruction Set Architecture, Memory Models, Registers, Instruction Set, and Data Types will be discussed. (Shee, 2004)

# ARM7TDMI Core Diagram

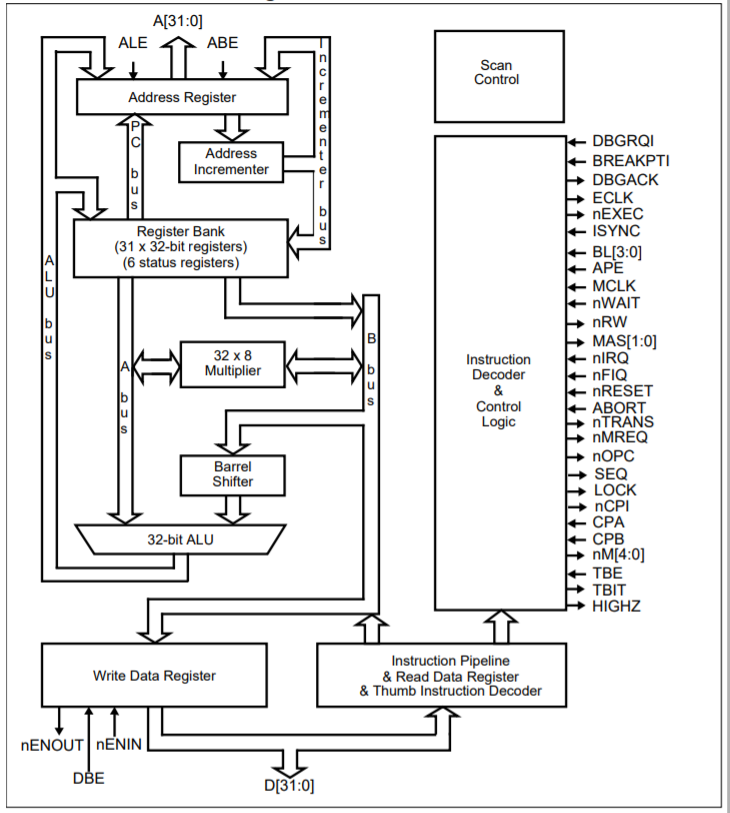


Figure 1: The ARM7DMI Core Diagram (ATMEL, 2004)

# The ARM Instruction Set Architecture

The drawback of most RISC processors, including the ARM7TDMI however, is code density. In many cost-critical applications, one of the more expensive system components has always been system memory. Therefore, the less memory a program occupies, the more cost effective. Since RISC processors have simple instructions, multiple instructions are needed to perform what may be done in a single CISC instruction. (Segars et al., 1995) The ARM microprocessor is based on the load/store architecture. ARM7TDMI does not offer any support for unaligned memory accesses. This microprocessor features two instruction sets, with both having mostly single clock-cycle execution. (McDermott, 2008). These instruction sets are a 16-bit Thumb instruction set and a 32-bit ARM instruction set

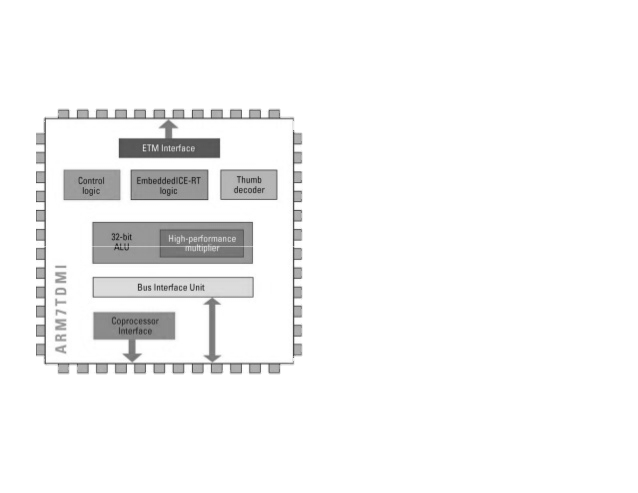


Figure 2: ARM7TDMI Architecture (Techcon, 2012)

# Conditional Execution

A beneficial and major feature of the ARM7TDMI's architecture is the ability for its instructions to be executed conditionally. The condition is specified by a two-letter suffix (e.g. EQ, CC) appended to the mnemonic. These conditions are then tested against the current processor flags and if they are not met, the instruction is then treated as a no-op. This feature often makes branching unnecessary, increasing code density, and avoiding pipeline stalls which in turn increases execution speed.

By design, the data processing instructions do not have an effect on the condition code flags but can be made to by suffixing S to the instruction. The comparison instructions, CMP and TST do this implicitly. (Thomas, 2012)

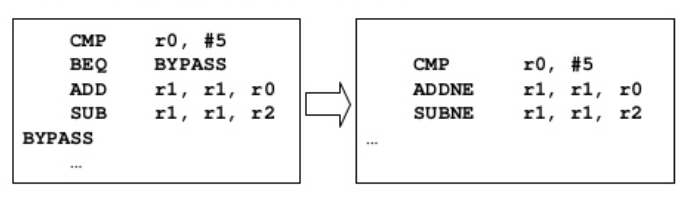


Figure 3: Conditional Execution in the ARM7TDMI (Varma, 2015)

## Status Flags and Condition Codes

When an ALU operation changes the flags:

* N — Negative
  + The negative bit is set if the result of a data processing instruction was negative.
* Z — Zero
  + The zero bit is set if the result was zero.
* C — Carry
  + The carry bit is set if an addition, subtraction or compare instruction causes a result that is bigger than 32 bits, or it is set from the output of the shifter for the move and logical instructions.
* V — Overflow
  + The overflow bit is set if an addition, subtraction or compare produces a signed result that is bigger than 31 bits.

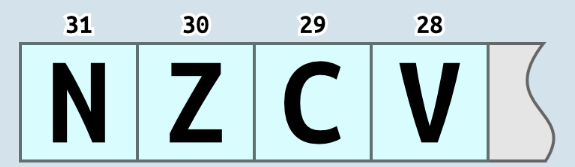


Figure 4: Flag Bits of the ARM7TDMI (Thomas, 2012)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Code | Suffix | Description | Flags |
| 0000 | EQ | Equal / equals zero | Z |
| 0001 | NE | Not equal | ! Z |
| 0010 | CS / HS | Carry set / unsigned higher or same | C |
| 0011 | CC / LO | Carry clear / unsigned lower | ! C |
| 0100 | MI | Minus / negative | N |
| 0101 | PL | Plus / positive or zero | ! N |
| 0110 | VS | Overflow | V |
| 0111 | VC | No overflow | ! V |
| 1000 | HI | Unsigned higher | C AND ! Z |
| 1001 | LS | Unsigned lower or same | ! C or Z |
| 1010 | GE | Signed greater than or equal | N == V |
| 1011 | LT | Signed less than | N != V |
| 1100 | GT | Signed greater than | ! Z and (N == V) |
| 1101 | LE | Signed less than or equal | Z or (N != V) |
| 1110 | AL | Always (default) | any |

Table 1: Condition Codes of the ARM7TDMI (Thomas, 2012)

# The Thumb Instruction Set

The Thumb instruction set is a subset of the most commonly used 32-bit ARM instructions. Each thumb instruction is 16 bits long, with a corresponding 32-bit ARM instruction that performs the same operation. There is excellent interoperability between ARM and Thumb states due to the thumb instructions, operating with the standard ARM register configuration. 16-bit thumb instructions are decompressed to their full 32-bit equivalents on execution without performance loss. (ATMEL, 2004) The Thumb instruction set contains a subset of 36 instruction formats taken from the standard 32-bit ARM instruction set which has then been re-coded into 16-bit op-codes. The first implementation of Thumb in an ARM microprocessor is on the ARM7TDMI, where the T indicates Thumb-awareness. (Goudge and Segars, 1996)

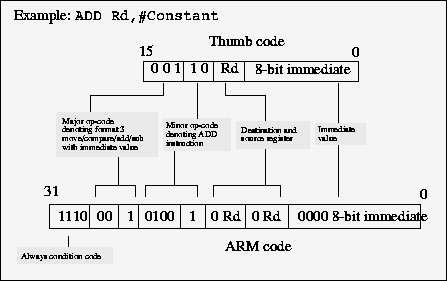


Figure 5: Example of how the ADD instruction is converted

from Thumb to ARM. (Bong-Ho, 1998)

## Design of Thumb

There were three different types of ARM instruction that were considered in creating a compressed instruction set.

1. Instructions which were shown to be the most frequently used and hence the most important
2. The instructions needed by the compiler to produce compact code
3. Instructions that had some redundancy in the fixed length op-code.

Trade-offs were made between code size, execution speed, ease of implementation and architectural elegance. The minimalistic code was the primary goal, however, not at the expense of performance. (Goudge and Segars, 1996)

## Why do we use thumb?

Thumb has all the advantages of using a 32-bit core such as:

* 32-bit registers
* 32-bit shifter
* 32-bit Arithmetic Logic Unit (ALU)
* 32-bit address space
* 32-bit memory transfer

Thumb offers a long branch range, powerful arithmetic operations, and a large address space. Thumb Code is typically 65% of the size of ARM code and provides 160% of the performance of ARM code when running from a 16-bit memory system. Therefore, the ARM7TDMI core is ideally suited to embedded applications where there is restricted memory bandwidth and code density is integral. (ATMEL, 2004) By making the ARM7TDMI core Thumb aware, the silicon area is able to be kept small and hence maintain low-power and high-MIPS/W performance. (Segars et al., 1995) The Thumb instruction set is not a replacement for the ARM instruction set. A Thumb-aware processor can execute both instruction sets, allowing for the designer to optimise their code at a subroutine level for either an extra fifteen per cent performance with an ARM or thirty per cent better code size with Thumb. Code, which requires the absolute maximum performance of ARM can execute in the ARM state from 32-bit wide memory and code which requires the absolute maximum code density can be run in the Thumb state from the sixteen-bit or eight-bit wide memory. (Goudge and Segars, 1996)

## Compromises Made with Thumb Code

With thumb code, conditional execution is not supported since the condition code would not have left enough space for a useful set of instructions. Another compromise made was how the register bank is accessed. ARM code has free access to 16 registers at once and uses three or four operand instructions with 4-bit register specifiers. For thumb code, however, in order to allow enough opcode space, there is free access to only eight registers. Instructions consist of the more conventional two or three operands and use 3- bit register specifiers. (Segars et al., 1995)

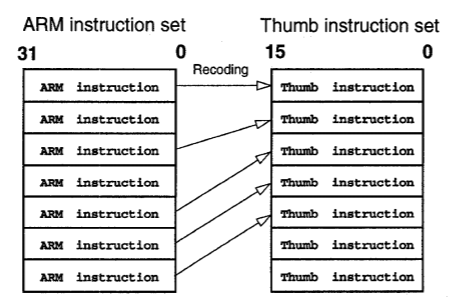


Figure 6: ARM to Thumb instruction set mapping. (Goudge and Segars, 1996)

# Arithmetic and the ARM7TDMI

The ARM7TDMI supports 3 different data types; Words which are 32-bits, Halfwords which are 16-bits and Bytes which are 8-bits. The ARM7TDMI Microprocessor includes integer arithmetic operations for add, subtract and multiply, however, no support is provided for performing division. The microprocessor supports 32-bit by 32-bit multiplication with either a 32-bit result or 64-bit result. Arithmetic instructions can either set or preserve the condition bits at the will of the programmer. (Diba, 2014)

## Example of Addition of Two 64-bit Signed/Unsigned Integers

When working with the ARM7TDMI, it is necessary to perform arithmetic operations with multi-word numbers. On the following page, there is an example of how to add two 64-bit signed/unsigned integers. For subtraction the same code can be used however, ADDS and ADC must be replaced with SUBS and SUB respectively.

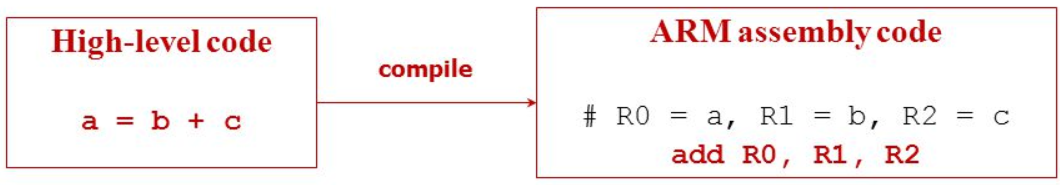


Figure 7: The conversion of High-Level C, to Low Level ARM. (Suh, 2015)

/\* The Following Program Will add two 64-bit two Word Numbers and Store the Result in two Words.

\*/

/\* Load Initial Values and Pointers \*/

LDR    R0, =Num1 ; pointer to high word of num1  
       LDR    R1, [R0][[1]](#footnote-1) ; load high word of num1  
       LDR    R2, [R0, #4]         ; load low word of num1  
       LDR    R0, =Num2         ; pointer to high word of num2  
       LDR    R3, [R0]             ; load high word of num2  
         LDR    R4, [R0, #4]         ; load low word of num2

/\* Now We Perform the Addition \*/

ADDS    R6, R2, R4 ; add low word and set carry  
         ADC    R5, R1, R3         ; add high word including carry

/\* Store Result in Registers \*/

LDR    R0, =Answer         ; pointer to answer  
         STR    R5, [R0]             ; store high word of answer  
         STR    R6, [R0, #4]         ; store low word of answer

# Registers in the ARM7TDMI

The ARM7TDMI microprocessor does not contain any addressable "memory space". Instead, internally it implements several registers that can be used in various operating modes, but none of these is directly accessible, they can only be used by software running on the ARM7TDMI. (Campbell, 2017) The ARM7TDMI Microprocessor has a total of thirty-seven registers – thirty-one general-purpose 32-bit registers and six status registers - but these cannot all be seen at once. The processor state and operating mode dictate which registers are available to the programmer. In the ARM state, 16 general registers and one or two status registers are visible at any one time. The ARM state register set contains 16 directly accessible registers: R0 to R15. All of these except R15 are general-purpose and may be used to hold either data or address values. In addition to these, there is a seventeenth register known as the CPSR, which contains condition code flags and the current mode bits. Another special-purpose register in the ARM7TDMI is known as the link register, which holds the address to return to when a function call completes. Register fourteen is used as the subroutine Link Register (LR) in the microprocessor. In privileged operating modes, an additional register known as the Saved Program Status Register (SPSR), is accessible. This register contains condition code flags and the mode bits which were saved as a result of an exception which caused entry into the current mode. (ATMEL, 2004)

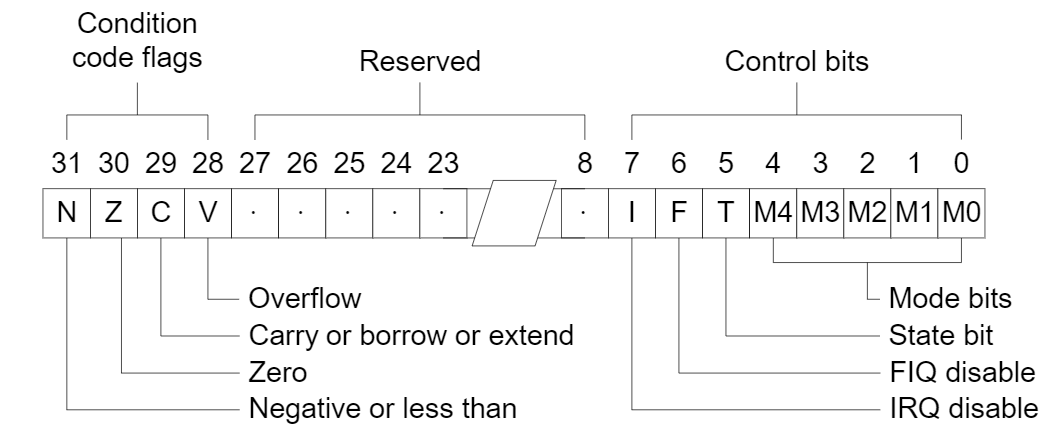


Figure 8: Program status register format ATMEL (2004)

## Control Bits

The bottom eight bits of the program status registers are known collectively as the control bits. These are the interrupt disable, T and mode bits. These control bits change depending on whether an exception has occurred or not. Software can manipulate these bits only if the processor is operating in a privileged mode.

The I and F bits are known as the Interrupt Disable Bits. When the I bit is set, the Interrupt Request line (IRQ) interrupts are disabled. (ATMEL, 2004) IRQs are direct hardware lines over which devices can send interrupt signals to the microprocessor. (Beal, 2014) When the F bit is set, Fast Interrupt Request (FIQ) interrupts are all disabled. FIQs are a higher priority interrupt request, prioritized by disabling all IRQ and FIQ handlers during request servicing meaning no other interrupts can occur during the processing of the active FIQ interrupt. (Kershaw et al., 2009)

The T bit reflects the operating state. When the T bit is set, the processor is executing in Thumb state and when the T bit is clear, the processor executing in ARM state. This operating state is reflected on the external signal TBIT. (ATMEL, 2004)

# Cache and the ARM7TDMI

The ARM7TDMI microprocessor does not have a memory management unit (Lee et al., 2004), an instruction cache or data cache and is mainly used as a controller core rather than for data processing. Hence, It is of great importance to reduce memory accesses as far as possible when applying it to processing applications. (Ramkishor and Gunashree, 2001) It is known that on-chip caches using static RAM consume power in the range of 25% to 45% of the total chip power. This is why its omission greatly improves power efficiency. (Panda et al., 2012) For situations where a cache is necessary, the ARM720T hard macro-cell contains the ARM7TDMI core as well as an 8kb unified cache and a Memory Management Unit (MMU). (ATMEL, 2004)

# Memory in the ARM7TDMI

The ARM7TDMI microprocessor treats memory as a linear collection of bytes numbered in ascending order from zero. For example, bytes zero to three might hold the first 32 bits and bytes four to seven may hold the second. The ARM7TDMI processor is bi-endian meaning it can treat words in memory as being stored in either big or little endian, with little-endian being the traditional format for ARM Processors. Little endian format on the microprocessor can be quite beneficial since numbers are calculated by the CPU starting with the least significant digits, meaning little-endian numbers are already set up for the processing order. (ATMEL, 2004)

Since the ARM7TDMI does not offer support for unaligned memory accesses, the processor features various workarounds to handle both unaligned data stores and unaligned data reads. For unaligned data stores, a half word store has register data bits [15:0] duplicated across the data bus and the memory controller will ignore the least significant bit of the address. For a byte store, register data bits [7:0] are duplicated on all four-byte lanes of the data bus. For unaligned data reads, a half word read, the selected half word is placed on the bottom [15:0] bits in the register and the remaining bits are cleared to zero with the memory controller ignoring the least significant bit of the address. For a byte read, the selected byte is placed on bits [7:0] in the destination register and the remaining bits of the register are filled with zeros by the core. (2008)(ARM, 2008)

# Operating Modes of the ARM7TDMI

The ARM7TDMI microprocessor has seven different modes of operation: User mode, Fast interrupt mode, supervisor mode, abort mode and system mode. User mode is the usual ARM program execution state and is used for executing most application programs. Interrupt (IRQ) mode is for handling general-purpose interrupts. Fast Interrupt (FIQ) mode supports either a channel or data transfer process. Abort mode is entered after a data or instruction Prefetch Abort. Supervisor mode is a protected mode that is only available for the operating system. Finally, system mode is a privileged user mode that is also only available for the operating system. (ATMEL, 2004)

## Low Power Consumption (Sleep) Mode

The ARM7TDMI microprocessor core does not inherently contain a low power sleep mode. The architecture does however contain a way for extension of the instruction set the coprocessor interface. This interface can be taken advantage of in order to define a coprocessor instruction set that implements a low power consumption (sleep/hibernate) mode. (Semiconductor and Manor, 2002)

# Operating Frequency of ARM7TDMI

Since the ARM7TDMI is a processing core, it is up to the manufacturer to set an appropriate operating frequency. Typically for the ARM7TDMI the operating frequency is anywhere between 20mhz to 60mhz with the typical frequency being 55mhz. Assuming adequate thermal and power solutions, a higher frequency chip can perform a high number of MIPS.

# The Watchdog Timer

The Watchdog Timer is an electronic timer that provides security against a system lockup if the microprocessor becomes trapped in an endless loop. On the ARM7TDMI, when the software runs in the normal state, a heartbeat signal prevents a reset of the microprocessor. When the microprocessor is switched to debug mode however, this heartbeat to the watchdog timer is stopped and the processer will be reset after some time. (Breeuwsma, 2006) The ARM7TDMI does not however offer a software reset of the microprocessor.

# The ARM7TDMI Instruction Set

ARM code has a simple and concise operand encoding scheme, which facilitates fixed-length 32-bit instructions and fast decoding with most operations being performed on registers. (Cambridge, 2006) The ARM7TDMI features ten different addressing modes, these are:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Name | ARM Example |
| Register to Register | MOV R0, R1 |
| Absolute | LDR R0, MEM |
| Literal | MOV R0, #15  ADD R1, R2, #12 |
| Indexed, Base | LDR R0, [R1] |
| Pre-Indexed, Base with Displacement | LDR R0, [R1, #4] |
| Pre-Indexed, Auto-Indexing | LDR R0, [R1, #4]! |
| Post-Indexing, Auto-Indexed | LDR R0, [R1], #4 |
| Double Register Indirect | LDR R0, [R1, R2] |
| Double Register Indirect with Scaling | LDR R0, [R1, r2, LSL #2] |
| Program Counter Relative | DR R0, [PC, #offset] |

Table 2: Summary of Arm Addressing Modes (Regina, 2012)

The ARM7TDMI Microprocessor supports some basic logical operators: AND, OR, XOR and BIC. It also supports a few stack operations such as STM, LDM, PUSH, POP. These instructions use the Stack Pointer (SP) which by convention is Register 13.

## Multi-byte Shifting on the ARM7TDMI

The ARM7TDMI has a 32-bit barrel shifter that can simultaneously execute shift and rotate instructions with ALU operations. (Chang et al., 2003) The shifter operand is represented by the least-significant 12 bits of the instruction. It can take one of eleven forms. For immediate operands, the assembler will make substitutions of comparable instructions in order to create the desired immediate operand. (Mirzaei, 2017) For example:

CMP R0, #-1 **⟶** CMN R0, #1

# Conclusion

Overall the ARM7TDMI microprocessor is a fully-featured powerful processor with excellent power efficiency and a relatively small size. It supports a wide variety of instruction and allows to programmer to optimize for performance or code density depending on the use case. This makes the microprocessor has an excellent cost to performance ratio with the chip costing anywhere between $10 and $20. The frequency for most chips containing the core is more than necessary for controllers and monitoring systems. These features make the ARM7TDMI microprocessor ideal for embedded systems.

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1. Note that in the ARM7TDMI, Little Endianness is the traditional format. Refer to section on memory on the ARM7TDMI for more information. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)