

# Securing Information-Centric Networking without negating Middleboxes

Nikos Fotiou, George Xylomenos and George C. Polyzos  
 Mobile Multimedia Laboratory & Department of Informatics  
 School of Information Sciences and Technology  
 Athens University of Economics and Business  
 76 Patision, Athens 10434, Greece  
 Email: {fotiou,xgeorge,polyzos}@aueb.gr

**Abstract**—Information-Centric Networking is a promising networking paradigm that overcomes many of the limitations of current networking architectures. Various research efforts investigate solutions for securing ICN. Nevertheless, most of these solutions relax security requirements in favor of network performance. In particular, they weaken end-user privacy and the architecture’s tolerance to security breaches in order to support middleboxes that offer services such as caching and content replication. In this paper, we adapt TLS, a widely used security standard, to an ICN context. We design solutions that allow session *reuse* and *migration* among multiple stakeholders and we propose an extension that allows authorized middleboxes to lawfully and transparently intercept secured communications.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Information-Centric Networking (ICN) brings the promise of a more secure and privacy friendly Internet. Indeed, the inherent security properties of ICN, including the requirement for explicit signaling of information availability and demand, are expected to significantly reduce phishing, spamming, and (D)DoS attacks. Nevertheless, this does not mean that ICN architectures are inherently secure, or that no additional security measures are required. On the contrary, ICN seems to lack a comprehensive security solution. This can be attributed to two main reasons. Firstly, ICN departs from the traditional endpoint oriented communication and adopts a content-centric communication paradigm. This shift in the communication plane impedes the (direct) adoption of existing security solutions and protocols. Secondly, ICN promotes the *use of middleboxes* (e.g., caches, content replication points) and *information flow aggregation* (e.g., by using multicast), which cannot be easily combined with security and privacy enhancing mechanisms.

In this paper we propose a TLS-based security protocol which allows introducing middleboxes in an ICN architecture. In particular, we propose mechanisms that can be used for transforming TLS from a host oriented protocol to a content oriented one, allowing different phases of the protocol (concerning the same piece of content) to be executed by different (authenticated) endpoints. Moreover, we present an extension to our protocol that allows authorized middleboxes to *lawfully* and *transparently* intercept secured transactions.

The structure of the remainder of this paper is as follows: In Section II we define a generic ICN model which is used

as a reference architecture for our solution. In Section III we detail the proposed solution. In Section IV we present an extension to our solution that enables middleboxes. In Section VI we discuss ICN security solutions, as well as, the problems middleboxes face when end-to-end security solutions are used. Finally, we evaluate our solution in Section V, from both the security and performance perspectives. We provide a summary and present our conclusions in Section VII.

## II. ICN REFERENCE ARCHITECTURE

Our solution is not bound to a particular ICN approach. Instead, in this section we define a generic ICN reference architecture that can be mapped to most ICN proposals. Our model consists of the following entities:

- *Owner*: The entity that creates and owns a *content item*. The owner is responsible for assigning *names* to content items. The role of the owner captures real world entities (e.g., an author, a university, a company, a government).
- *Subscriber*: A network device owned by a real world entity that is interested in receiving a content item
- *Publisher*: A network device that actually hosts a content item.

All content items are identified by a *name*. A content name in our model is composed of two parts: a prefix which is an ICN routable name and is used by all (inter-)networking functions, and a suffix which can be hidden from the network. Henceforth, the term *name* will refer to the *prefix of a content item name*.

Our model entities interact with each other in the following manner: An owner creates a content item and makes available a copy of it to at least one publisher. Publishers advertise the names of the content items they host. Subscribers *subscribe* to content item names in which they are interested. A subscription triggers a process (which is out of the scope of our model) that results in a publisher issuing a *publication* that contains the desired item. This publication is *forwarded* by the network to the intended subscriber(s). A publication message includes a *forwarding identifier*. Forwarding identifiers are used by forwarding devices in order to take proper forwarding decisions. When we refer to a content item name, we will use the notation “name”, whereas when we refer to a forwarding identifier, we will use the notation [name]. In

many ICN architectures “name”=[name], i.e., the name of a content item is also used as a forwarding identifier.

### A. Security model

Each content owner owns a public-private key pair. The public keys of content owners are considered known to the subscribers (or, there exists a secure mechanism for learning them). Our security model considers two types of publishers: trusted publishers and regular publishers. A *trusted* publisher has been *authorized* by a content owner to store certain content items. This authorization can be proven using an x.509 digital certificate signed by the content owner. This certificate includes the content “names” for which the publisher is authorized, using the *subject alternative name* extension [1]. Moreover, this certificate can be used for establishing secure connections. A *regular* publisher just happens to store a content item, but cannot prove it is authorized to store that item. Nevertheless, in the general case these publishers do not act maliciously. A regular publisher can be a cache, a content replication point, and generally any middlebox. In Section IV we present a mechanism with which a regular publisher can be become authorized for a specific transaction.

## III. SOLUTION OVERVIEW

The cornerstone of our solution is a handshake protocol that results in the establishment of a symmetric encryption key and if necessary of an HMAC key,<sup>1</sup> between a subscriber and a publisher. These keys are then used for protecting the transmitted content. Our handshake protocol is an adaptation of the TLS handshake protocol (section 7.4 of [2]).

Our handshake protocol is composed of four messages: two subscriptions and two publications. In the following we consider that both subscriptions are received by the same trusted publisher. In Section III-A we present solutions that can be used when this is not possible/desirable (i.e., these solutions allow a subscriber to begin the handshake with a publisher and finish it with another). The subscriptions that are part of the handshake protocol must not be aggregatable. This can be achieved using various mechanisms, e.g., by not aggregating – in general – subscriptions that do not have the same payload, by using a “special” flag, or by appending a statistically unique *nonce* to the content name included in the subscription. Moreover, the publications that are part of the handshake protocol should not be cachable, as a cached publication will result in an unsuccessful handshake.<sup>2</sup>

The protocol starts with the subscriber sending a subscription for the desired item. The payload of this subscription message contains the fields of the *Client Hello* TLS message. In order to achieve forward secrecy the preferred key exchange algorithm must always be (elliptic-curve) ephemeral Diffie-Hellman–(EC)DHE.

The subscription message is routed to a publisher. Assuming that this is a new session (we discuss session reuse in Section III-A), the publisher responds with

<sup>1</sup>If authenticated symmetric encryption is used, e.g., AES-GCM, then an HMAC algorithm is not required

<sup>2</sup>It is the equivalent of “injecting” a previously captured server TLS handshake response.

a publication. This publication contains the fields of the *Server Hello*, *Server Certificate*, *Server Key Exchange*, *Certificate Request*, and *Server Hello Done* TLS messages. This messages also includes a signature that can be validated using the publisher’s certificate.

With the reception of this publication the subscriber verifies that a publisher is trusted by validating the received digital signature. If the validation is successful, the subscriber sends a new subscription for the same item. This time the subscription payload contains the fields of the *Client Key Exchange*, *Change Cipher Spec*, and *Finished* TLS messages.

When the publisher receives this subscription it should be able to associate it with the state generated during the the first step of the handshake. Currently, TLS server implementations use the [source IP, source port] pair of the received TLS packets in order to maintain state. However, not all ICN architectures have similar packet fields, i.e., a field that contains a subscriber-specific location identifier that makes possible for a publisher to tell if two subscriptions have originated from the same subscriber. If no such information exists then two approaches can be considered: if in the first subscription message a nonce was appended to the content name (in order to prevent subscription aggregation) then the same nonce can be used in this subscription; alternatively, the subscriber can include in the subscription payload the *TLS session identifier*. The publisher completes the handshake by responding to this subscription with a publication that contains the fields of the *Change Cipher Spec* and *Finish* TLS messages.

### A. Session migration

We now consider the case where content items can be provided by a *group* of trusted publishers and we discuss how a subscriber that has initiated a session with a group member can continue it with another. In order to implement this functionality we use the session ticket TLS extension [3]. With this extension a publisher can encrypt all secret information and parameters of a session in a *ticket*, store the key required to decrypt the ticket locally, and transmit the ticket to the subscriber; then the subscriber may use the ticket to request the reuse of previous settings. In order for all group members to be able to decrypt a ticket they should agree on the same encryption key. This key can be randomly and periodically generated by a *key generator* and proactively published to the group members. Twitter for example, uses a similar approach in which a set of key generator machines generate and store in all twitter’s web servers a fresh ticket encryption key every 12 hours [4]. It should be noted, however, that this approach relaxes the requirement for perfect forward secrecy: a stolen ticket encryption key can be used for decrypting all sessions that used tickets encrypted with this key (e.g., in the case of twitter, all user sessions within a 12 hours window).

## IV. ENABLING MIDDLEBOXES

We now describe an extension to our solution that allows a regular publisher to lawfully intercept secured communications. With this extension a regular publisher is authorized by a trusted publisher to intercept a *single* session. That regular

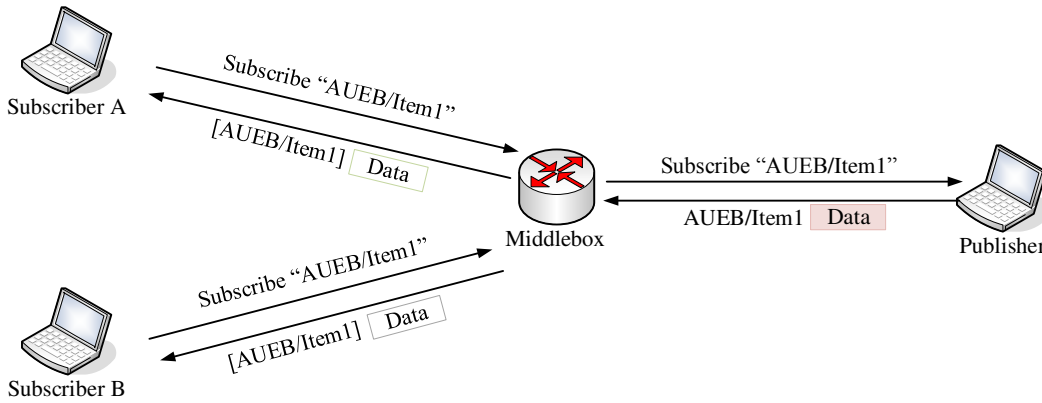


Fig. 1. A middlebox that lawfully intercepts a secured communication session to aggregate subscriptions for the same content item.

publisher (henceforth referred to as the middlebox) learns only secret information related to the intercepted session, i.e., it does not learn any long lasting secret. Moreover, this extension requires no modification of the protocol in the subscriber's side, therefore, subscribers are completely oblivious to middleboxes. These middleboxes are equipped with a trusted publisher certificate but not with the secret information associated with this certificate.

With our handshake protocol a subscriber is able to tell if a publisher is trusted by using the digital signature included in the first publication of the handshake protocol. This verification is an integral part of the handshake protocol and a handshake must not be considered successful if this step fails. A middlebox is not able to generate this signature, since it requires the trusted publisher's secret key. In order to successfully complete the handshake, a middlebox should: (i) establish a secured session with the trusted publisher, and (ii) send a *signature request* that contains the name of the requested content and the data to be signed. Upon receiving the signature request the trusted publisher first checks if the middlebox can handle a subscription for this content name. If this check is successful, the trusted publisher uses its secret key and signs the necessary fields. Finally, it sends the digital signature back to the middlebox. As a next step, the middlebox sends a publication back to the subscriber that includes the digital signature. Now, the handshake can be successfully completed. It should be noted that a middlebox does not have to establish a secured session with the trusted publisher for every subscriber: an established secured session can be used for transmitting multiple signature requests. Moreover, step (ii) has to take place for every new session, therefore, a trusted publisher can at any time refuse a signature request, stopping this way a specific transaction.

Figure 1 illustrates an interesting use case of this extension. In this use case, two subscribers subscribe to the same content item. A middlebox intercepts both these subscriptions and at the same time subscribes to the desired item. After all subscriptions are completed there is a single data flow from the trusted publisher to the middlebox; the middlebox decrypts and re-encrypts this flow and transmits it to the subscribers.

An interesting security property of this use case is that a third party observing the encrypted data of these flows is not able to tell whether these flows concern the same content or not.

A notable property of this extension is that trusted publishers can keep track of item access statistics: everytime a middlebox sends a signature request, it includes that name of the content item concerned, hence, a trusted publisher can track the number of times a content item has been requested.

#### A. HTTPS-to-ICN gateway

This extension can also be applied to legacy TLS. An interesting application that can be built using our extension is a middlebox that acts as a HTTPS-to-ICN gateway. This gateway could allow a legacy HTTPS client to retrieve a content item from (or through) an ICN network. If plain HTTP were used then the approach described in [5] could have been used; with this approach the gateway translates the web server's domain name into a content item name and issues the appropriate subscription. When TLS is used the gateway should map the destination IP-port of the first TLS packet to a domain name. This is required not only for the domain to content name translation but also because the gateway should respond to the client with a server certificate. Fortunately, the Server Name Indication TLS extension [6] can be used to solve this problem. With this extension a TLS client includes in its `hello` message the domain name of the server with which it wants to connect. Another consideration is how the HTTPS client can verify the integrity of the received item. This problem is related to the fact that the gateway can manipulate in an undetectable way a content item. This problem should be solved in the application layer, for example the client could retrieve directly from the server the item's hash and compare it with the hash of the item it received. In any case, no modification is required to the TLS client.

## V. EVALUATION

#### A. Performance evaluation

We now examine the delay that is introduced by our solution. We consider the sample topology of Figure 3. In this

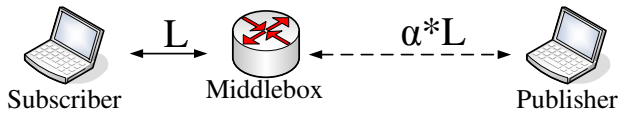


Fig. 2. Sample evaluation topology.

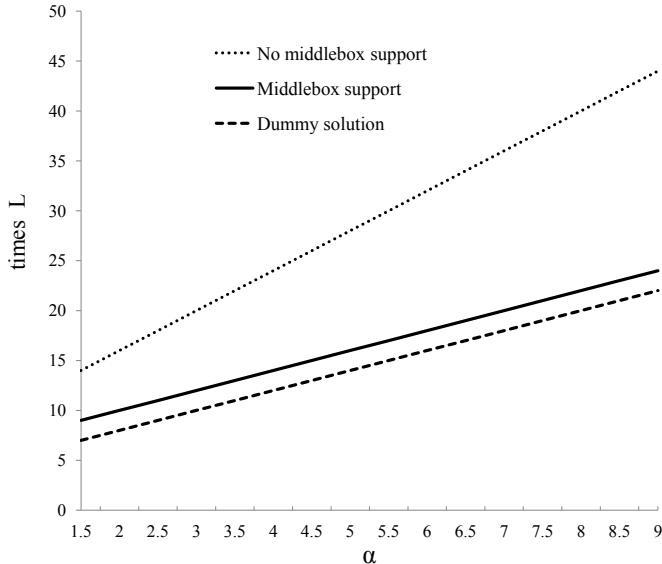


Fig. 3. Time required for the first packet of the publication to reach the subscriber (measured in multiples of the latency  $L$ ) as a function of  $\alpha$ .

figure there is a subscriber, a middlebox that acts as content replication point, and a trusted publisher. The subscriber wants to subscribe to an item that is stored in both the middlebox and the publisher. The latency of the link between the subscriber and the middlebox is  $L$ , whereas the latency of the link between the middlebox and the publisher is  $\alpha * L$ , where  $\alpha$  is a variable. We assume that the latency of the links is the same for both directions. We compare the time required for the subscriber to receive the first packet of the publication when three security solutions are used: our solution without middlebox support, our solution with middlebox support, and a dummy solution described in the following. When the dummy solution is used, the content is encrypted with a symmetric encryption key and stored in the middlebox. A subscriber sends simultaneously a subscription message to the middlebox and a key request message to the publisher. Therefore, the delay introduced in this case is the time required for the key request message to reach the publisher plus the time required for the publisher response to reach the subscriber, i.e.,  $2 * (L + \alpha * L)$ .<sup>3</sup> When our solution is used, we assume that the first packet arrives immediately after the last publication of the handshake. Figure 3 shows the delay introduced by each solution measured as a function of  $\alpha$ .

### B. Security evaluation

The security of our solution without middlebox support relies on the security properties of TLS and the negotiated

security algorithms. In particular, our solution provides the following security properties:

- *Verification that a publisher is trusted.* With our solution a subscriber is able to tell if a publisher is authorized to host a particular content item. In contrast to host-oriented architectures, there is no notion of publisher identity and hence publisher authentication.
- *Content confidentiality and integrity.* With our solution a symmetric encryption key and (if necessary) an HMAC key are produced. These keys can be used for securing content confidentiality and integrity.
- *Unobservability and unlinkability.* A malicious 3<sup>rd</sup> party that monitors network flows (or even tampers with them) is able to tell only the prefix of the content items names and not the full name (unobservability). Moreover, a malicious 3<sup>rd</sup> party is not able to tell whether two distinct network flows concern the same content item, or not (unlinkability). These two properties are closely related to end-user *privacy*.
- *Perfect forward secrecy.* With our solution there is no single secret value that can be used to compromise multiple, already completed transactions

When middleboxes are supported, the following security properties hold:

- *Trusted publishers have control of the process.* Indeed, if a trusted publisher refuses to accept a signature request the handshake will never be completed. Therefore, a publisher may even completely refuse to use middleboxes.
- *The middlebox learns no trusted publisher-related secret.* The only secret information that a middlebox learns are the session secrets, negotiated with the subscriber.

Nevertheless some security precautions should be considered. The trusted publisher has no control over the negotiated security algorithms, therefore subscriber implementations should make sure that only secure algorithms are supported. Moreover, a middlebox is able to modify a content item without being detected, therefore content authenticity mechanisms should be in place. Another security measure that should be considered when trusted publishers allow middleboxes to intercept secured communication, is to make sure that no content item that may jeopardize subscriber security is offered via a middlebox. For example, middleboxes should be prevented from handling subscribers' credentials. This can be achieved by naming all sensitive content items using a predefined name and by making sure that trusted publishers will always prevent middleboxes from intercepting a session that concerns such an item.

## VI. RELATED WORK

### A. ICN security solutions

In general, most ICN related security solutions follow the same pattern: a piece of content is encrypted with a symmetric key and then this key is encrypted in a way that only legitimate subscribers can decrypt it. Using the same encryption key for all subscribers has the advantage that encrypted content can be cached. Nevertheless, it creates serious security threats. In [7] a publisher periodically generates a symmetric encryption

<sup>3</sup>In all cases, we consider that the processing time is negligible.

key and encrypts it with the public keys of all legitimate subscribers. It then uses this key to encrypt all content items. If the private key of a subscriber is compromised then all previous messages can be decrypted, therefore this scheme does not provide forward secrecy. Moreover, it is possible for a third party to determine if two users received the same piece of content, therefore this scheme does provide unlinkability. In [8] a publisher splits a content item in chunks and encrypts each chunk using two keys. The second key changes periodically in a way that given a key at time  $t$ , all keys generated at any time  $l < t$  can be generated. The second key is the same for a “group of subscribers”, therefore it is possible to distinguish if two subscribers that belong to the same group have received the same content item. Moreover, this key is delivered to authorized subscribers by following a key exchange protocol during which the key is encrypted using a session key. The session key is generated by the subscriber and it is transmitted to the publisher encrypted using the publisher’s public key. Therefore, if the publisher’s private key is compromised all previous communication can be decrypted. Wood and Uzun [9] encrypt content items with a symmetric key and then encrypt the symmetric keys with a public key encryption scheme that facilitates proxy re-encryption. Again, it is possible for an attacker to link two information flows. Moreover, if the symmetric key is compromised all previous transactions can be decrypted. The work in [10] uses Identity-Based Encryption in order to encrypt a symmetric encryption key that has been used for encrypting a piece of content. As in all previous related work, there is no unlinkability. Moreover, if the private key of a subscriber is compromised, all previous communication can be decrypted.

### B. Middlebox support

As HTTPS traffic increases, middleboxes become less effective. In order to mitigate this problem, the IETF HTTPbis Working Group has drafted a proposal for “explicit trusted” proxies [11]. Explicit trusted proxies are authorized by end-users to fetch secured content on behalf of them. Nevertheless, this solution has many shortcomings: end-users are involved in the proxy selection process, HTTP clients have to be modified and web servers have no control over the process. Sherry et al. [12] follow another approach. In their solution, a server includes in every TLS packet some “attributes” of the (encrypted) content item e.g., its type, possible age restrictions etc. These tokens are encrypted in a form that only authorized middleboxes can inspect. Nevertheless, these middleboxes have very limited control over the encrypted content.

With our solution, middleboxes have full access to the content, therefore they are able to cache it or manipulate it. Middlebox support is completely transparent to subscribers, i.e., a subscriber is not able to tell whether it interacts with a middlebox or a publisher. Moreover, a publisher has full control of the process, i.e., at any time it may prevent a middlebox for intercepting secured communication. Finally, a middlebox learns no publisher-related secrets.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In this paper we proposed a TLS-based security solution for ICN. In particular, we proposed modifications to TLS so that it can be effectively used in a content-centric environment. We chose to modify TLS, instead of creating a clean slate solution, since TLS is an industry standard and its security properties are continuously examined and tested by many researchers around the world. The main challenges which we came across were: how to allow the network to transparently migrate a process from one publisher to another, as well as, how to enable middlebox support without modifying the subscriber-side part of the protocol.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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