Network Working Group
Internet-Draft
Intended status: Best Current Practice
Expires: 25 December 2021

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23 June 2021

Fragmentation Avoidance in DNS
draft-ietf-dnsop-avoid-fragmentation-05

Abstract

EDNS0 enables a DNS server to send large responses using UDP and is widely deployed. Path MTU discovery remains widely undeployed due to security issues, and IP fragmentation has exposed weaknesses in application protocols. Currently, DNS is known to be the largest user of IP fragmentation. It is possible to avoid IP fragmentation in DNS by limiting response size where possible, and signaling the need to upgrade from UDP to TCP transport where necessary. This document proposes to avoid IP fragmentation in DNS.

Status of This Memo

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1. Introduction

DNS has EDNS0 [RFC6891] mechanism. It enables a DNS server to send large responses using UDP. EDNS0 is now widely deployed, and DNS (over UDP) is said to be the biggest user of IP fragmentation.

Fragmented DNS UDP responses have systemic weaknesses, which expose the requestor to DNS cache poisoning from off-path attackers. (See Appendix A for references and details.)

[RFC8900] summarized that IP fragmentation introduces fragility to Internet communication. The transport of DNS messages over UDP should take account of the observations stated in that document.

TCP avoids fragmentation using its Maximum Segment Size (MSS) parameter, but each transmitted segment is header-size aware such that the size of the IP and TCP headers is known, as well as the far end's MSS parameter and the interface or path MTU, so that the segment size can be chosen so as to keep the each IP datagram below a target size. This takes advantage of the elasticity of TCP's packetizing process as to how much queued data will fit into the next segment. In contrast, DNS over UDP has little datagram size elasticity and lacks insight into IP header and option size, and so must make more conservative estimates about available UDP payload space.

This document proposes to set IP_DONTFRAG / IPV6_DONTFRAG in DNS/UDP messages in order to avoid IP fragmentation, and describes how to avoid packet losses due to IP_DONTFRAG / IPV6_DONTFRAG.

2. Terminology

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "NOT RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in BCP14 [RFC2119] [RFC8174] when, and only when, they appear in all capitals, as shown here.

"Requestor" refers to the side that sends a request. "Responder" refers to an authoritative, recursive resolver or other DNS component that responds to questions. (Quoted from EDNS0 [RFC6891])

"Path MTU" is the minimum link MTU of all the links in a path between a source node and a destination node. (Quoted from [RFC8201])

"Path MTU discovery" is defined by [RFC1191], [RFC8201] and [RFC8899].

IP_DONTFRAG option is not defined by any RFCs. It is similar to IPV6_DONTFRAG option defined in [RFC3542]. IP_DONTFRAG option is used on BSD systems to set the Don't Fragment bit [RFC0791] when sending IPv4 packets. On Linux systems this is done via IP_MTU_DISCOVER and IP_PMTUDISC_DO.

Many of the specialized terms used in this document are defined in DNS Terminology [RFC8499].

3. Proposal to avoid IP fragmentation in DNS

The methods to avoid IP fragmentation in DNS are described below:

3.1. Recommendations for UDP responders

* UDP responders SHOULD send DNS responses with IP_DONTFRAG / IPV6_DONTFRAG [RFC3542] options.

* If the UDP responder detects immediate error that the UDP packet cannot be sent beyond the path MTU size (EMSGSIZE), the UDP responder MAY recreate response packets fit in path MTU size, or TC bit set.

* UDP responders MAY probe to discover the real MTU value per destination.

* UDP responders SHOULD compose UDP responses that result in IP packets that do not exceed the path MTU to the requestor. If the path MTU discovery failed or is impossible, UDP responders SHOULD compose UDP responses that result in IP packets that do not exceed the default maximum DNS/UDP payload size described in Section 3.3.

  The cause and effect of the TC bit is unchanged from EDNS0 [RFC6891].

3.2. Recommendations for UDP requestors

* UDP requestors SHOULD send DNS requests with IP_DONTFRAG / IPV6_DONTFRAG [RFC3542] options.

* UDP requestors MAY probe to discover the real MTU value per destination. Then, calculate their maximum DNS/UDP payload size as the reported path MTU minus IPv4/IPv6 header size (20 or 40) minus UDP header size (8). If the path MTU discovery failed or is impossible, use the default maximum DNS/UDP payload size described in Section 3.3.

* UDP requestors SHOULD use the requestor's payload size as the calculated or the default maximum DNS/UDP payload size.

* UDP requestors MAY drop fragmented DNS/UDP responses without IP reassembly to avoid cache poisoning attacks.

* DNS responses may be dropped by IP fragmentation. Upon a timeout, UDP requestors may retry using TCP or UDP, per local policy.

3.3. Default Maximum DNS/UDP payload size

Fragmentation avoidance is achieved with the IP(V6)_DONTFRAG option. The purpose of packet size limitation is to decrease packet loss due to the effects of the IP(V6)_DONTFRAG option.

Default maximum DNS/UDP payload size depends on the connectivity of each node, it cannot be determined unconditionally. However, there are good proposed values.

Operators MAY select a good number from Table 1. Details of proposed values are described in Appendix B.

Source	IPv4	IPv6
Minimal: RFC 4035 MUST	1220	1220
Software developers / DNSFlagDay2020 propose	1232	1232 (1280-40-8)
Authors' recommendation	1400	1400 (1500 -40 -8 - some headers)
Maximum: Ethernet MTU 1500 [Huston2021]	1472 (1500-20-8)	1452 (1500-40-8)
Measured	MTU -20-8	MTU -40-8

Table 1: Default maximum DNS/UDP payload size

However, operators of DNS servers SHOULD measure their path MTU to the Internet at setting up DNS servers (and when network configuration changes).

How to measure path MTU is described in Appendix D.

Operators of authoritative servers (that offer global DNS zones) and full-service resolvers (that access authoritative servers of the global DNS) SHOULD measure their path MTU to well-known locations on the Internet, such as [a-m].root-servers.net or [a-m].gtld-servers.net.

Operators of full-service resolvers would be well advised to measure their path MTU to several authority name servers and to a random sample of their expected stub resolver client networks, to find the upper boundary on IP/UDP packet size in the average case. Or, operators of ISPs know their customers' connectivity and customers' MTU to ISPs' servers. This limit should not be exceeded by most messages received or transmitted by a full resolver, or else fallback to TCP will occur too often.

DNS clients (stub resolvers) need to specify an appropriate requestor's payload size when supporting EDNS0. In case of CPEs, embedded devices, and user devices, network operators can not control them, developers may choose small values such as 1220 and 1232.

Other DNS servers are out-of-scope of this document. (For example, Forwarding only resolvers, or private DNS).

4. Incremental deployment

The proposed method supports incremental deployment.

When a full-service resolver implements the proposed method, its stub resolvers (clients) and the authority server network will no longer observe IP fragmentation or reassembly from that server, and will fall back to TCP when necessary.

When an authoritative server implements the proposed method, its full service resolvers (clients) will no longer observe IP fragmentation or reassembly from that server, and will fall back to TCP when necessary.

5. Request to zone operators and DNS server operators

Large DNS responses are the result of zone configuration. Zone operators SHOULD seek configurations resulting in small responses. For example,

* Use smaller number of name servers (13 may be too large)

* Use smaller number of A/AAAA RRs for a domain name

* Use 'minimal-responses' configuration: Some implementations have 'minimal responses' configuration that causes DNS servers to make response packets smaller, containing only mandatory and required data (Appendix E).

* Use smaller signature / public key size algorithm for DNSSEC. Notably, the signature size of ECDSA or EdDSA is smaller than RSA.

6. Considerations

6.1. Protocol compliance

In prior research ([Fujiwara2018] and dns-operations mailing list discussions), there are some authoritative servers that ignore EDNS0 requestor's UDP payload size, and return large UDP responses.

It is also well known that there are some authoritative servers that do not support TCP transport.

Such non-compliant behavior cannot become implementation or configuration constraints for the rest of the DNS. If failure is the result, then that failure must be localized to the non-compliant servers.

7. IANA Considerations

This document has no IANA actions.

8. Security Considerations

9. Acknowledgments

The author would like to specifically thank Paul Wouters, Mukund Sivaraman, Tony Finch, Hugo Salgado, Peter van Dijk, Brian Dickson, Puneet Sood and Jim Reid for extensive review and comments.

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Appendix A. Weaknesses of IP fragmentation

"Fragmentation Considered Poisonous" [Herzberg2013] proposed effective off-path DNS cache poisoning attack vectors using IP fragmentation. "IP fragmentation attack on DNS" [Hlavacek2013] and "Domain Validation++ For MitM-Resilient PKI" [Brandt2018] proposed that off-path attackers can intervene in path MTU discovery [RFC1191] to perform intentionally fragmented responses from authoritative servers. [RFC7739] stated the security implications of predictable fragment identification values.

DNSSEC is a countermeasure against cache poisoning attacks that use IP fragmentation. However, DNS delegation responses are not signed with DNSSEC, and DNSSEC does not have a mechanism to get the correct response if an incorrect delegation is injected. This is a denial-of-service vulnerability that can yield failed name resolutions. If cache poisoning attacks can be avoided, DNSSEC validation failures will be avoided.

In Section 3.2 (Message Side Guidelines) of UDP Usage Guidelines [RFC8085] we are told that an application SHOULD NOT send UDP datagrams that result in IP packets that exceed the Maximum Transmission Unit (MTU) along the path to the destination.

A DNS message receiver cannot trust fragmented UDP datagrams primarily due to the small amount of entropy provided by UDP port numbers and DNS message identifiers, each of which being only 16 bits in size, and both likely being in the first fragment of a packet, if fragmentation occurs. By comparison, TCP protocol stack controls packet size and avoid IP fragmentation under ICMP NEEDFRAG attacks. In TCP, fragmentation should be avoided for performance reasons, whereas for UDP, fragmentation should be avoided for resiliency and authenticity reasons.

Appendix B. Details of maximum DNS/UDP payload size discussions

There are many discussions for default path MTU size and maximum DNS/UDP payload size.

* The minimum MTU for an IPv6 interface is 1280 octets (see Section 5 of [RFC8200]). Then, we can use it as default path MTU value for IPv6. The corresponding minimum MTU for an IPv4 interface is 68 (60 + 8) [RFC0791].

* Most of the Internet and especially the inner core has an MTU of at least 1500 octets. Maximum DNS/UDP payload size for IPv6 on MTU 1500 ethernet is 1452 (1500 minus 40 (IPv6 header size) minus 8 (UDP header size)). To allow for possible IP options and distant tunnel overhead, authors' recommendation of default maximum DNS/UDP payload size is 1400.

* [RFC4035] defines that "A security-aware name server MUST support the EDNS0 message size extension, MUST support a message size of at least 1220 octets". Then, the smallest number of the maximum DNS/UDP payload size is 1220.

* In order to avoid IP fragmentation, [DNSFlagDay2020] proposed that the UDP requestors set the requestor's payload size to 1232, and the UDP responders compose UDP responses fit in 1232 octets. The

size 1232 is based on an MTU of 1280, which is required by the IPv6 specification [RFC8200], minus 48 octets for the IPv6 and UDP headers.

* [Huston2021] analyzed the result of [DNSFlagDay2020], reported that their measurements suggest that in the interior of the Internet between recursive resolvers and authoritative servers the prevailing MTU is at 1,500 and there is no measurable signal of use of smaller MTUs in this part of the Internet, and proposed that their measurements suggest setting the EDNS0 Buffer size to IPv4 1472 octets and IPv6 1452 octets.

Appendix C. How to retrieve path MTU value to a destination from applications

Socket options: "IP_MTU (since Linux 2.2) Retrieve the current known path MTU of the current socket. Valid only when the socket has been connected. Returns an integer. Only valid as a getsockopt(2)." (Quoted from Debian GNU Linux manual: ip(7))

"IPV6_MTU getsockopt(): Retrieve the current known path MTU of the current socket. Only valid when the socket has been connected. Returns an integer." (Quoted from Debian GNU Linux manual: ipv6(7))

Section 3.4 of [RFC1122] specifies FIND_MAXSIZES() as one of "INTERNET/TRANSPORT LAYER INTERFACEs".

Appendix D. How to retrieve minimal MTU value to a destination

The Linux tool "tracepath" can be used to measure the path MTU to a destination.

Or, "ping/ping6" command with "-D" Don't Fragment bit set / Disable IPv6 fragmentation options.

Appendix E. Minimal-responses

Some implementations have 'minimal responses' configuration that causes a DNS server to make response packets smaller, containing only mandatory and required data.

Under the minimal-responses configuration, DNS servers compose response messages using only RRSets corresponding to queries. In case of delegation, DNS servers compose response packets with delegation NS RRSet in authority section and in-domain (in-zone and below-zone) glue in the additional data section. In case of non-existent domain name or non-existent type, the start of authority (SOA RR) will be placed in the Authority Section.

In addition, if the zone is DNSSEC signed and a query has the DNSSEC OK bit, signatures are added in answer section, or the corresponding DS RRSet and signatures are added in authority section. Details are defined in [RFC4035] and [RFC5155].

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