

**CoAP Pub-Sub Profile for Authentication and Authorization for  
Constrained Environments (ACE)  
draft-palombini-ace-coap-pubsub-profile-05**

Abstract

This specification defines a profile for authentication and authorization for publishers and subscribers in a pub-sub setting scenario in a constrained environment, using the ACE framework. This profile relies on transport layer or application layer security to authorize the publisher to the broker. Moreover, it relies on application layer security for publisher-broker and subscriber-broker communication.

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## [1.](#) Introduction

The publisher-subscriber setting allows for devices with limited reachability to communicate via a broker that enables store-and-forward messaging between the devices. The pub-sub scenario using the Constrained Application Protocol (CoAP) is specified in [\[I-D.ietf-core-coap-pubsub\]](#). This document defines a way to authorize nodes in a CoAP pub-sub type of setting, using the ACE framework [\[I-D.ietf-ace-oauth-authz\]](#), and to provide the keys for protecting the communication between these nodes.

### [1.1.](#) Terminology

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in [RFC 2119](#) [\[RFC2119\]](#).

Readers are expected to be familiar with the terms and concepts described in [\[I-D.ietf-ace-oauth-authz\]](#), [\[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm\]](#) and [\[I-D.ietf-core-coap-pubsub\]](#). In particular, analogously to [\[I-D.ietf-ace-oauth-authz\]](#), terminology for entities in the architecture such as Client (C), Resource Server (RS), and



Authorization Server (AS) is defined in OAuth 2.0 [[RFC6749](#)] and [[I-D.ietf-ace-actors](#)], and terminology for entities such as the Key Distribution Center (KDC) and Dispatcher in [[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm](#)].

## 2. Profile Overview

The objective of this document is to specify how to authorize nodes, provide keys, and protect a CoAP pub-sub communication, as described in [[I-D.ietf-core-coap-pubsub](#)], using [[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm](#)], which itself expands the Ace framework ([[I-D.ietf-ace-oauth-authz](#)]), and profiles ([[I-D.ietf-ace-dtls-authorize](#)], [[I-D.ietf-ace-oscore-profile](#)]).

The architecture of the scenario is shown in Figure 1.

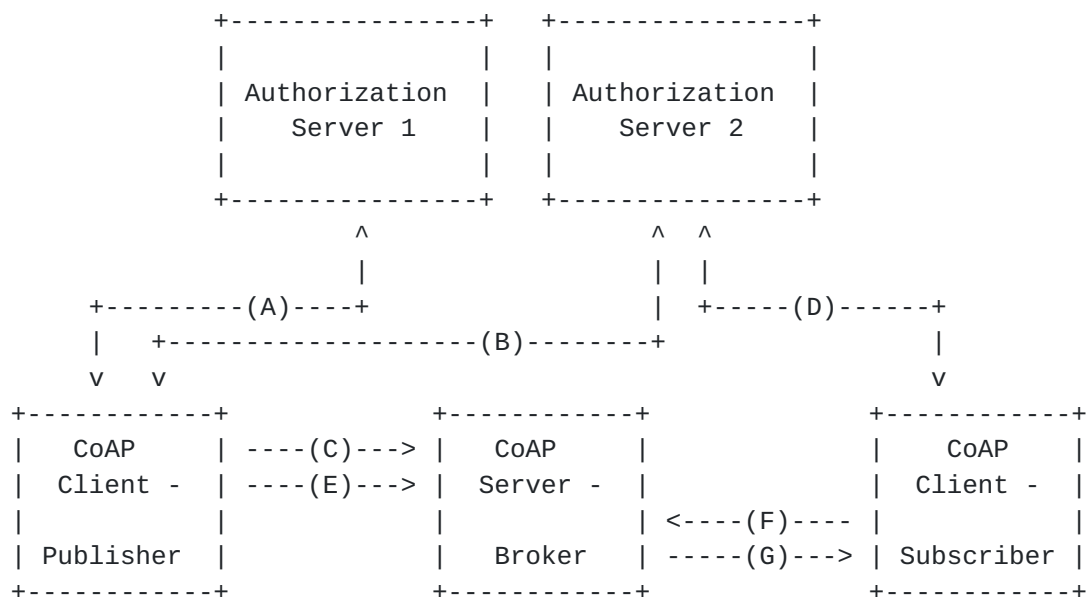


Figure 1: Architecture CoAP pubsub with Authorization Servers

The RS is the broker, which contains the topic. This node corresponds to the Dispatcher, in [[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm](#)]. The AS1 hosts the policies about the Broker: what endpoints are allowed to Publish on the Broker. The Clients access this node to get write access to the Broker. The AS2 hosts the policies about the topic: what endpoints are allowed to access what topic. This node represents both the AS and Key Distribution Center roles from [[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm](#)].

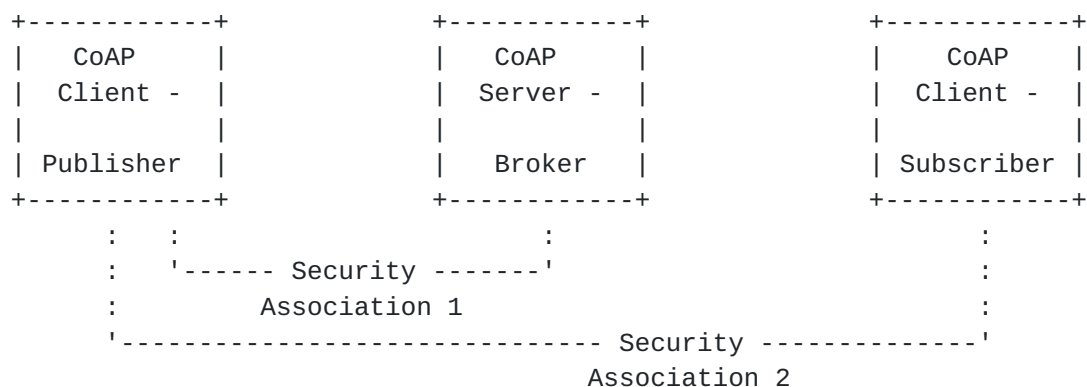
There are four phases, the first three can be done in parallel.



1. The Publisher requests publishing access to the Broker at the AS1, and communicates with the Broker to set up security.
2. The Publisher requests access to a specific topic at the AS2
3. The Subscriber requests access to a specific topic at the AS2.
4. The Publisher and the Subscriber securely post to and get publications from the Broker.

This exchange aims at setting up 2 different security associations: on the one hand, the Publisher has a security association with the Broker, to protect the communication and securely authorize the Publisher to publish on a topic (Security Association 1). On the other hand, the Publisher has a security association with the Subscriber, to protect the publication content itself (Security Association 2). The Security Association 1 is set up using AS1 and a profile of [[I-D.ietf-ace-oauth-authz](#)], the Security Association 2 is set up using AS2 and [[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm](#)].

Note that, analogously to the Publisher, the Subscriber can also set up an additional security association with the Broker, using an AS, in the same way the Publisher does with AS1. In this case, only authorized Subscribers would be able to get notifications from the Broker. The overhead would be that each Subscriber should access the AS and get all the information to start a secure exchange with the Broker.



Note that AS1 and AS2 might either be co-resident or be 2 separate physical entities, in which case access control policies must be exchanged between AS1 and AS2, so that they agree on rights for joining nodes about specific topics. How the policies are exchanged is out of scope for this profile.



### 3. coap\_pubsub\_app Profile

This profile uses [[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm](#)], which expands the ACE framework. This document specifies which exact parameters from [[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm](#)] have to be used, and the values for each parameter.

The Publisher and the Subscriber map to the Client in [[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm](#)], the AS2 maps to the AS and to the KDC, the Broker maps to the Dispatcher.

Note that both publishers and subscribers use the same profile, called "coap\_pubsub\_app".

#### 3.1. Retrieval of COSE Key for protection of content

This phase is common to both Publisher and Subscriber. To maintain the generality, the Publisher or Subscriber is referred as Client in this section.

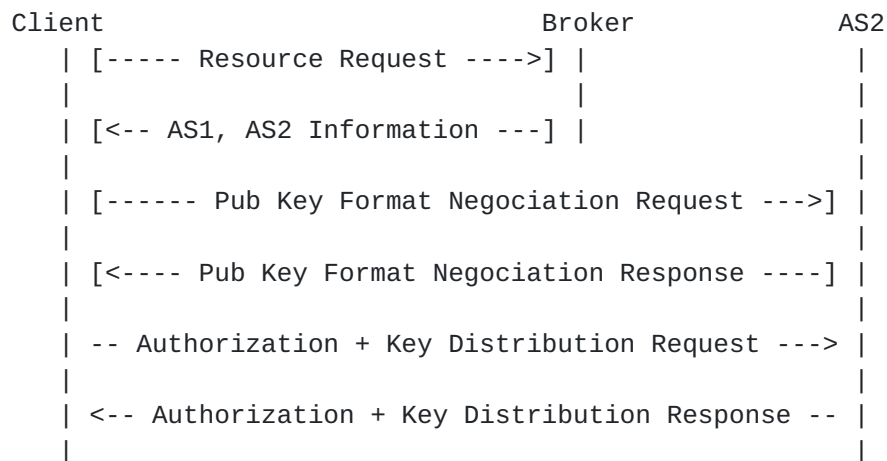


Figure 2: B: Access request - response

Complementary to what is defined in [[I-D.ietf-ace-oauth-authz](#)] ([Section 5.1.1](#)), to determine the AS2 in charge of a topic hosted at the Broker, the Broker MAY send the address of both the AS in charge of the topic back to the Client in the 'AS' parameter in the AS Information, as a response to an Unauthorized Resource Request ([Section 5.1.2](#)). An example using CBOR diagnostic notation is given below:





```
4.01 Unauthorized
Content-Format: application/ace+cbor
{"AS": "coaps://as1.example.com/token,
coaps://as2.example.com/pubsubkey"}
```

Figure 3: AS1, AS2 Information example

After retrieving the AS2 address, the Client MAY send a Pub Key Format Negotiation Request to the AS, in order to request necessary information concerning the public keys in the group, as well as concerning the algorithm and related parameters for computing signatures in the group. This request is a subset of the Token Post request defined in Section 3.3 of [[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm](#)], specifically including the parameters 'sign\_info' and 'pub\_key\_enc'. The AS MUST respond with the response defined in Section 3.3 of [[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm](#)], specifically including the same parameters 'sign\_info' and 'pub\_key\_enc'.

After that, the Client sends an Authorization + Key Distribution Request, which is an Authorization Request merged with a Key Distribution Request, as described in [[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm](#)], Sections [3.1](#) and [4.1](#). The reason for merging these two messages is that the AS2 is both the AS and the KDC, in this setting, so the Authorization Response and the Post Token message are not necessary.

More specifically, the Client sends a POST request to the /token endpoint on AS2, with Content-Format = "application/ace+cbor" that MUST contain in the payload (formatted as a CBOR map):

- o the following fields from the Authorization Request (Section 3.1 of [[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm](#)]):
  - \* 'grant\_type' set to "client\_credentials",
  - \* OPTIONALLY, if needed, other additional parameters such as 'client\_id'
- o the following fields from the Key Distribution Request (Section 4.1 of [[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm](#)]):
  - \* 'type' set to 1 ("key distribution")
  - \* 'client\_cred' parameter containing the Client's public key formatted as a COSE\_Key, if the Client needs to directly send that to the AS2,
  - \* 'scope' parameter set to a CBOR array containing:



- + the broker's topic as first element, and
  - + the string "publisher" if the client request to be a publisher, "subscriber" if the client request to be a subscriber, or a CBOR array containing both, if the client request to be both.
- \* 'get\_pub\_keys' parameter set to the empty array if the Client needs to retrieve the public keys of the other pubsub members
  - \* OPTIONALLY, if needed, the 'pub\_keys\_repos' parameter

Note that the alg parameter in the 'client\_cred' COSE\_Key MUST be a signing algorithm, as defined in [section 8 of \[RFC8152\]](#).

Examples of the payload of a Authorization + Key Distribution Request are specified in Figure 5 and Figure 8.

The AS2 verifies that the Client is authorized to access the topic and, if the 'client\_cred' parameter is present, stores the public key of the Client.

The AS2 response is an Authorization + Key Distribution Response, see Section 4.2 of [\[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm\]](#), with Content-Format = "application/ace+cbor". The payload (formatted as a CBOR map) MUST contain:

- o the following fields from the Authorization Response (Section 3.2 of [\[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm\]](#)):
  - \* 'profile' set to "coap\_pubsub\_app", as specified in [Section 8.1](#)
  - \* OPTIONALLY 'scope', set to a CBOR array containing:
    - + the broker's topic as first element, and
    - + the string "publisher" if the client is an authorized publisher, "subscriber" if the client is an authorized subscriber, or a CBOR array containing both, if the client is authorized to be both.
- o the following fields from the Key Distribution Response (Section 4.2 of [\[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm\]](#)):
  - \* 'kty' identifies a key type "COSE\_Key", as defined in [Section 8.2](#).



- \* 'key', which contains a "COSE\_Key" object (defined in [\[RFC8152\]](#), containing:
  - + 'kty' with value 4 (symmetric)
  - + 'alg' with value defined by the AS2 (Content Encryption Algorithm)
  - + 'Base IV' with value defined by the AS2
  - + 'k' with value the symmetric key value
  - + OPTIONALLY, 'kid' with an identifier for the key value
- \* OPTIONALLY, exp with the expiration time of the key
- \* 'pub\_keys', containing the public keys of all authorized signing members formatted as COSE\_Keys, if the 'get\_pub\_keys' parameter was present and set to the empty array in the Authorization + Key Distribution Request

Examples for the response payload are detailed in Figure 6 and Figure 9.

#### **4. Publisher**

In this section, it is specified how the Publisher requests, obtains and communicates to the Broker the access token, as well as the retrieval of the keying material to protect the publication.



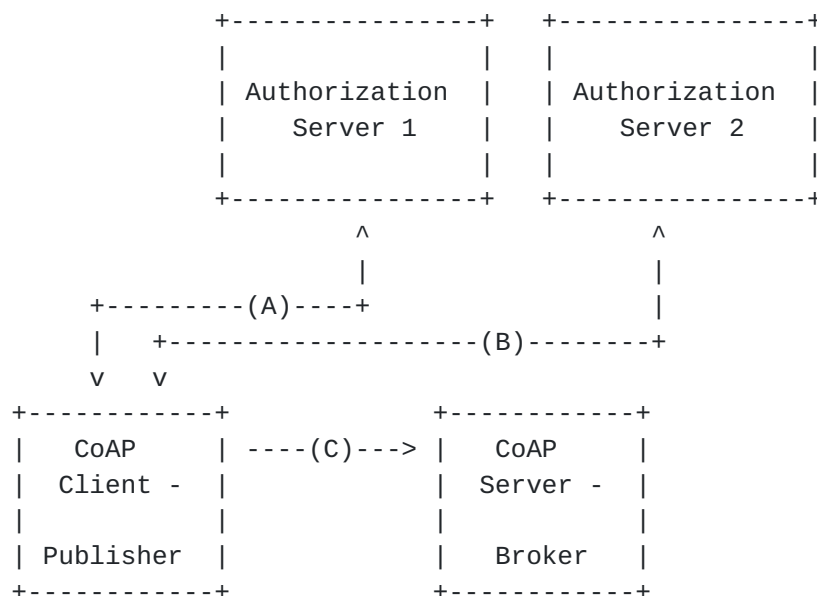


Figure 4: Phase 1: Publisher side

This is a combination of two independent phases:

- o one is the establishment of a secure connection between Publisher and Broker, using an ACE profile such as DTLS [[I-D.ietf-ace-dtls-authorize](#)] or OSCORE [[I-D.ietf-ace-oscore-profile](#)]. (A)(C)
- o the other is the Publisher's retrieval of keying material to protect the publication. (B)

In detail:

(A) corresponds to the Access Token Request and Response between Publisher and Authorization Server to retrieve the Access Token and RS (Broker) Information. As specified, the Publisher has the role of a CoAP client, the Broker has the role of the CoAP server.

(C) corresponds to the exchange between Publisher and Broker, where the Publisher sends its access token to the Broker and establishes a secure connection with the Broker. Depending on the Information received in (A), this can be for example DTLS handshake, or other protocols. Depending on the application, there may not be the need for this set up phase: for example, if OSCORE is used directly.

(A) and (C) details are specified in the profile used.

(B) corresponds to the retrieval of the keying material to protect the publication end-to-end with the subscribers (see [Section 6.1](#)),





and uses [[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm](#)]. The details are defined in [Section 3.1](#).

An example of the payload of an Authorization + Key Distribution Request and corresponding Response for a Publisher is specified in Figure 5 and Figure 6.

```
{
  "grant_type" : "client_credentials",
  "scope" : ["Broker1/Temp", "publisher"],
  "type" = 1,
  "client_id" : "publisher1",
  "client_cred" :
    { / COSE_Key /
      / type / 1 : 2, / EC2 /
      / kid / 2 : h'11',
      / alg / 3 : -7, / ECDSA with SHA-256 /
      / crv / -1 : 1, / P-256 /
      / x / -2 : h'65eda5a12577c2bae829437fe338701a10aaa375e1bb5b5de1
08de439c08551d',
      / y / -3 : h'1e52ed75701163f7f9e40ddf9f341b3dc9ba860af7e0ca7ca7e
9eecd0084d19c'
    }
}
```

Figure 5: Authorization + Key Distribution Request payload for a Publisher

```
{
  "profile" : "coap_pubsub_app",
  "kty" : "COSE_Key",
  "key" : {1: 4, 2: h'1234', 3: 12, 5: h'1f389d14d17dc7',
-1: h'02e2cc3a9b92855220f255fff1c615bc'}
}
```

Figure 6: Authorization + Key Distribution Response payload for a Publisher

## 5. Subscriber

In this section, it is specified how the Subscriber retrieves the keying material to protect the publication.



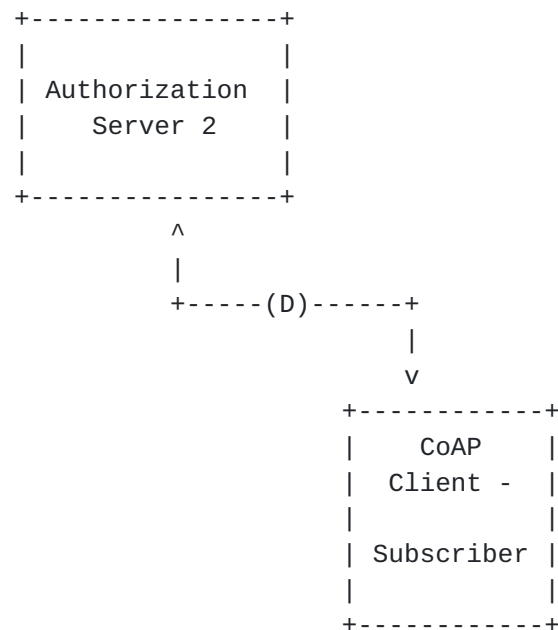


Figure 7: Phase 2: Subscriber side

Step (D) between Subscriber and AS2 corresponds to the retrieval of the keying material to verify the publication end-to-end with the publishers (see [Section 6.1](#)). The details are defined in [Section 3.1](#)

This step is the same as (B) between Publisher and AS2 ([Section 3.1](#)), with the following differences:

- o The Authorization + Key Distribution Request MUST NOT contain the 'client\_cred' parameter', the role element in the 'scope' parameter MUST be set to "subscriber". The Subscriber MUST have access to the public keys of all the Publishers; this MAY be achieved in the Authorization + Key Distribution Request by using the parameter 'get\_pub\_keys' set to empty array.
- o The Authorization + Key Distribution Response MUST contain the 'pub\_keys' parameter.

An example of the payload of an Authorization + Key Distribution Request and corresponding Response for a Subscriber is specified in Figure 8 and Figure 9.



```

{
  "grant_type" : "client_credentials",
  "type" = 1,
  "scope" : ["Broker1/Temp", "subscriber"],
  "get_pub_keys" : [ ]
}

```

Figure 8: Authorization + Key Distribution Request payload for a Subscriber

```

{
  "profile" : "coap_pubsub_app",
  "scope" : ["Broker1/Temp", "subscriber"],
  "kty" : "COSE_Key"
  "key" : {1: 4, 2: h'1234', 3: 12, 5: h'1f389d14d17dc7',
-1: h'02e2cc3a9b92855220f255fff1c615bc'},
  "pub_keys" : [
    {
      1 : 2, / type EC2 /
      2 : h'11', / kid /
      3 : -7, / alg ECDSA with SHA-256 /
      -1 : 1 , / crv P-256 /
      -2 : h'65eda5a12577c2bae829437fe338701a10aaa375e1bb5b5de108de43
9c08551d', / x /
      -3 : h'1e52ed75701163f7f9e40ddf9f341b3dc9ba860af7e0ca7ca7e9eecd
0084d19c' / y /
    }
  ]
}

```

Figure 9: Authorization + Key Distribution Response payload for a Subscriber

## 6. Pub-Sub Protected Communication

This section specifies the communication Publisher-Broker and Subscriber-Broker, after the previous phases have taken place. The operations of publishing and subscribing are defined in [\[I-D.ietf-core-coap-pubsub\]](#).



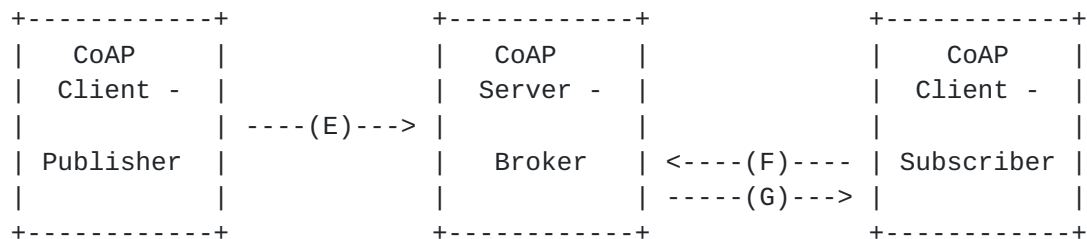


Figure 10: Phase 3: Secure communication between Publisher and Subscriber

The (E) message corresponds to the publication of a topic on the Broker. The publication (the resource representation) is protected with COSE ([RFC8152]). The (F) message is the subscription of the Subscriber, which is unprotected, unless a profile of ACE [I-D.ietf-ace-oauth-authz] is used between Subscriber and Broker. The (G) message is the response from the Broker, where the publication is protected with COSE.

The flow graph is presented below.

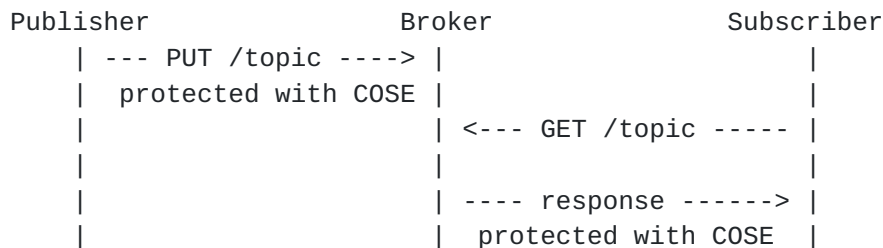


Figure 11: (E), (F), (G): Example of protected communication

### 6.1. Using COSE Objects To Protect The Resource Representation

The Publisher uses the symmetric COSE Key received from AS2 in exchange B (Section 3.1) to protect the payload of the PUBLISH operation (Section 4.3 of [I-D.ietf-core-coap-pubsub]). Specifically, the COSE Key is used to create a COSE\_Encrypt0 with algorithm specified by AS2. The Publisher uses the private key corresponding to the public key sent to the AS2 in exchange B (Section 3.1) to countersign the COSE Object as specified in Section 4.5 of [RFC8152]. The CoAP payload is replaced by the COSE object before the publication is sent to the Broker.

The Subscriber uses the kid in the countersignature field in the COSE object to retrieve the right public key to verify the countersignature. It then uses the symmetric key received from AS2 to verify and decrypt the publication received in the payload of the CoAP Notification from the Broker.





The COSE object is constructed in the following way:

- o The protected Headers (as described in [Section 3 of \[RFC8152\]](#)) MAY contain the kid parameter, with value the kid of the symmetric COSE Key received in [Section 3.1](#) and MUST contain the content encryption algorithm.
- o The unprotected Headers MUST contain the Partial IV, with value a sequence number that is incremented for every message sent, and the counter signature that includes:
  - \* the algorithm (same value as in the asymmetric COSE Key received in (B)) in the protected header;
  - \* the kid (same value as the kid of the asymmetric COSE Key received in (B)) in the unprotected header;
  - \* the signature computed as specified in [Section 4.5 of \[RFC8152\]](#).
- o The ciphertext, computed over the plaintext that MUST contain the CoAP payload.

The external\_aad is an empty string.

An example is given in Figure 12



```

16(
  [
    / protected / h'a2010c04421234' / {
      \ alg \ 1:12, \ AES-CCM-64-64-128 \
      \ kid \ 4: h'1234'
    } / ,
    / unprotected / {
      / iv / 5:h'89f52f65a1c580',
      / countersign / 7:[
        / protected / h'a10126' / {
          \ alg \ 1:-7
        } / ,
        / unprotected / {
          / kid / 4:h'11'
        },
        / signature / SIG / 64 bytes signature /
      ],
    ],
  / ciphertext / h'8df0a3b62fccff37aa313c8020e971f8aC8d'
)

```

Figure 12: Example of COSE Object sent in the payload of a PUBLISH operation

The encryption and decryption operations are described in sections 5.3 and 5.4 of [\[RFC8152\]](#).

## 7. Security Considerations

In the profile described above, the Publisher and Subscriber use asymmetric crypto, which would make the message exchange quite heavy for small constrained devices. Moreover, all Subscribers must be able to access the public keys of all the Publishers to a specific topic to be able to verify the publications. Such a database could be set up and managed by the same entity having control of the topic, i.e. AS2.

An application where it is not critical that only authorized Publishers can publish on a topic may decide not to make use of the asymmetric crypto and only use symmetric encryption/MAC to confidentiality and integrity protect the publication, but this is not recommended since, as a result, any authorized Subscribers with access to the Broker may forge unauthorized publications without being detected. In this symmetric case the Subscribers would only need one symmetric key per topic, and would not need to know any information about the Publishers, that can be anonymous to it and the Broker.



Subscribers can be excluded from future publications through re-keying for a certain topic. This could be set up to happen on a regular basis, for certain applications. How this could be done is out of scope for this work.

The Broker is only trusted with verifying that the Publisher is authorized to publish, but is not trusted with the publications itself, which it cannot read nor modify. In this setting, caching of publications on the Broker is still allowed.

TODO: expand on security and privacy considerations

## **8. IANA Considerations**

### **8.1. ACE Groupcomm Profile Registry**

The following registrations are done for the "ACE Groupcomm Profile" Registry following the procedure specified in [\[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm\]](#).

Note to RFC Editor: Please replace all occurrences of "[[This document]]" with the RFC number of this specification and delete this paragraph.

Name: coap\_pubsub\_app

Description: Profile for delegating client authentication and authorization for publishers and subscribers in a pub-sub setting scenario in a constrained environment.

CBOR Key: TBD

Reference: [[This document]]

### **8.2. ACE Groupcomm Key Registry**

The following registrations are done for the ACE Groupcomm Key Registry following the procedure specified in [\[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm\]](#).

Note to RFC Editor: Please replace all occurrences of "[[This document]]" with the RFC number of this specification and delete this paragraph.

Name: COSE\_Key

Key Type Value: TBD



Profile: coap\_pubsub\_app

Description: COSE\_Key object

References: [[RFC8152](#)], [[This document]]

## **9. References**

### **9.1. Normative References**

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Palombini, F. and M. Tiloca, "Key Provisioning for Group Communication using ACE", [draft-ietf-ace-key-groupcomm-02](#) (work in progress), July 2019.
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- [RFC2119] Bradner, S., "Key words for use in RFCs to Indicate Requirement Levels", [BCP 14](#), [RFC 2119](#), DOI 10.17487/RFC2119, March 1997, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc2119>>.
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### **9.2. Informative References**

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**[I-D.ietf-ace-dtls-authorize]**

Gerdes, S., Bergmann, O., Bormann, C., Selander, G., and L. Seitz, "Datagram Transport Layer Security (DTLS) Profile for Authentication and Authorization for Constrained Environments (ACE)", [draft-ietf-ace-dtls-authorize-08](#) (work in progress), April 2019.

**[I-D.ietf-ace-oscore-profile]**

Palombini, F., Seitz, L., Selander, G., and M. Gunnarsson, "OSCORE profile of the Authentication and Authorization for Constrained Environments Framework", [draft-ietf-ace-oscore-profile-07](#) (work in progress), February 2019.

**[Appendix A](#). Requirements on Application Profiles**

This section lists the specifications on this profile based on the requirements defined in [Appendix A](#) of [\[I-D.ietf-ace-key-groupcomm\]](#)

- o Specify the communication protocol the members of the group must use: CoAP pub/sub.
- o Specify the security protocol the group members must use to protect their communication: Object Security of Content using COSE.
- o Specify the encoding and value of the identifier of group or topic and role of 'scope': see [Section 3.1](#)).
- o Specify and register the application profile identifier: "coap\_pubsub\_app", see [Section 8.1](#).
- o Specify the acceptable values of 'kty': "COSE\_Key", see [Section 3.1](#).
- o Specify the format and content of 'group\_policies' entries
- o Optionally, specify the format and content of 'mgt\_key\_material': not defined
- o Optionally, specify transport profile of ACE [\[I-D.ietf-ace-oauth-authz\]](#) to use between Client and KDC: up to the application.
- o Optionally, specify the encoding of public keys, of 'client\_cred', and of 'pub\_keys' if COSE\_Keys are not used: COSE\_Keys are used.
- o Optionally, specify the acceptable values for parameters related to signature algorithm and signature keys: 'sign\_alg',



'sign\_parameters', 'sign\_key\_parameters', 'pub\_key\_enc': not defined

- o Optionally, specify the negotiation of parameter values for signature algorithm and signature keys, if 'sign\_info' and 'pub\_key\_enc' are not used: not defined.

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