

Zen Crypted Chat X.509

Tactical Communicator

Encryption Architecture

Technical White Paper

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Abstract

Secure messaging applications rely on end-to-end encryption (E2EE) to protect user communications from interception and tampering. This article examines the cryptographic protocols employed by several messaging systems — Signal, WhatsApp, Threema, Session, Chat X.509, Telegram (Secret Chats), and Viber — focusing on their ciphers, algorithms, and underlying design decisions.

Cryptographic Properties

Introduction

End-to-end encrypted (E2EE) messaging has become a cornerstone of digital privacy. The strength of such systems depends critically on the cryptographic primitives and protocol constructions chosen during development.

This work compares several representative secure messaging protocols with respect to their key agreement mechanisms, symmetric encryption schemes, authentication methods, secrecy properties, and supporting cryptographic libraries. The protocols under consideration are:

- Signal
- WhatsApp
- Chat X.509
- Threema
- Session
- Telegram
- Viber

The comparison is structured around a set of core cryptographic parameters (Chat X.509 is highlighted for its unique X.509 integration), followed by an analysis of the design trade-offs that led to the observed differences.

Key Agreement DH

Key agreement establishes shared secrets between parties. All examined protocols use elliptic-curve-based (EC) Diffie–Hellman (DH) variants.

NIST P-256 ECDH

The NIST P-256 curve (secp256r1) is a 256-bit elliptic curve over the prime field \mathbb{F}_p with $p = 2^{256} - 2^{224} + 2^{192} + 2^{96} - 1$, following the short Weierstrass equation

$$y^2 \equiv x^3 - 3x + b \pmod{p}.$$

It provides approximately 128 bits of security with cofactor $h = 1$. Standardized in NIST FIPS 186-4, it is widely supported but has faced criticism for its parameter origins. NIST P-256 ECDH is used in Chat X.509 v1.

Curve25519 / X25519

Curve25519 is a Montgomery curve over \mathbb{F}_p with $p = 2^{255} - 19$, equation

$$By^2 = x^3 + Ax^2 + x, \quad A = 486662, B = 1.$$

The X25519 function provides constant-time scalar multiplication with cofactor $h = 8$ and approximately 128-bit security. Its design prioritizes side-channel resistance and transparent parameters. Curve25519 / X25519 is used in Threema, Signal, WhatsApp, Session, Chat X.509 v2, and Viber.

Ed25519

Ed25519 is a twisted Edwards-form elliptic curve digital signature scheme derived from Curve25519, operating over the same prime field \mathbb{F}_p with $p = 2^{255} - 19$. The curve equation is

$$-x^2 + y^2 = 1 + dx^2y^2,$$

It provides roughly 128 bits of security with cofactor $h = 8$. Ed25519 uses the Edwards birational equivalence to Curve25519 for efficient, constant-time implementations, offering strong resistance to side-channel attacks and hash-function weaknesses via its EdDSA construction (double-hash of message and private key). It achieves the highest security level among widely deployed signature schemes (against both classical and quantum side-channel threats) and is standardized in RFC 8032 with widespread adoption in protocols like SSH, Signal, Session, and TLS.

Ephemeral-Static ECDH

A single ephemeral ECDH exchange using one party's ephemeral key and the other's static public key establishes a session key. Provides forward secrecy for that session but no per-message key evolution. Ephemeral-Static ECDH keys provide minimal forward secrecy and are used in Threema, Session, Chat X.509 v1.

X3DH + Double Ratchet

Extended Triple Diffie — Hellman (X3DH) combines multiple ECDH exchanges (including signed prekeys and one-time prekeys) for asynchronous authenticated key agreement. The Double Ratchet algorithm then applies symmetric KDF ratcheting and periodic DH ratcheting to derive per-message keys, achieving both forward secrecy and post-compromise security. X3DH + Double Ratchet is used in Signal, WhatsApp, Viber, and Chat X.509 v2.

Digital Identity / Long-term Keys

Long-term keys authenticate parties and bind identities.

Curve25519

Pure static Curve25519 keys registered with the server; no separate signing keys. Curve25519 DH is used in Threema.

Ed25519 + X25519

Long-term X25519 for key agreement, separate Ed25519 key for signing prekeys and identity authentication. Ed25519 is a twisted Edwards curve over the same field as Curve25519:

$$-x^2 + y^2 = 1 + dx^2y^2,$$

with high security and constant-time implementation (RFC 8032). Ed25519 is used in Signal, WhatsApp, Session, and Viber.

X.509 certificate-bound EC keys

Traditional X.509 certificates (ITU-T X.509 / RFC 5280) containing either NIST P-256 (v1) or X25519 (v2) public keys, encoded in ASN.1 DER (X.690). Certificates chain to trusted roots, enabling enterprise PKI integration. X.509 certificate envelopes for keys are used in Chat X.509 v1/v2.

Key Derivation

HKDF-SHA256/512

HMAC-based Extract-and-Expand KDF (RFC 5869) using SHA-256 or SHA-512. Provides domain separation and strong extraction from shared secrets. HKDF is used in Signal, WhatsApp, Chat X.509, and Viber.

Argon2id

Memory-hard password-based KDF (RFC 9106), hybrid of data-independent (Argon2i) and data-dependent (Argon2d) memory access. Designed to resist GPU/ASIC cracking. Argon2id is used in Session.

HSalsa20

Core Salsa20 function applied to a 256-bit key and 128-bit nonce to derive a 256-bit subkey. Used in NaCl/libsodium for XSalsa20 nonce extension. HSalsa20 is used in Threema.

Symmetric Encryption

AES-256

256-bit key Advanced Encryption Standard (FIPS 197) block cipher in GCM or IGE mode. AES-256 in CBC mode (with HMAC-SHA256 authentication) is used in Signal and WhatsApp. AES-256 in IGE mode is used in Telegram Secret Chats.

ChaCha20

20-round variant of Salsa20 stream cipher (RFC 8439) with 256-bit key and 96/128-bit nonce. Addition-rotation-XOR design offers excellent software performance and timing-attack resistance. ChaCha20 (with Poly1305 authentication) is used in Chat X.509 v1 and v2.

XSalsa20

Salsa20/20 core with 192-bit nonce extension. First 128 nonce bits and key run through HSalsa20 to produce subkey; remaining 64 bits used as standard Salsa20 nonce. Allows safe random nonce selection. XSalsa20 is used in Threema, Session.

Authentication / MAC

Poly1305

One-time Wegman–Carter authenticator over $\mathbb{F}_{2^{130}-5}$, 128-bit security with unique keys/nonces. Poly1305 is used in Threema, Session, Chat X.509 v1/v2.

GCM tag

Galois-field authentication (GHASH) providing 128-bit security (birthday bound). (Not used as primary authentication in the examined protocols; Signal/WhatsApp use HMAC-SHA256.)

HMAC-SHA256

Standard HMAC construction for additional authentication in ratchet chains. HMAC-SHA256 is used as primary message authentication in Signal, WhatsApp, and additional layers in the ratchet.

Authenticated Encryption AEAD

AES-256

Counter-mode encryption with Galois/Counter Mode authentication. Parallelizable, hardware-accelerated via AES-NI, 128-bit security. (True AEAD not used; Signal and WhatsApp use AES-256-CBC + HMAC-SHA256 Encrypt-then-MAC construction.)

ChaCha20-Poly1305

RFC 8439 AEAD: ChaCha20 keystream XOR encryption + Poly1305 authentication. High software speed, mandatory in TLS 1.3. ChaCha20-Poly1305 is used in Chat X.509 v1/v2.

XSalsa20-Poly1305

NaCl-style separate encryption and authentication (not strictly AEAD but equivalent security when composed correctly). libsodium sealed boxes: XSalsa20 encryption + Poly1305 authentication using derived one-time keys. XSalsa20-Poly1305 is used in Session and Threema.

Forward Secrecy

Double Ratchet

Per-message key deletion and DH ratcheting ensure past messages remain confidential even if long-term keys are later compromised. Double Ratchet (2-Ratchet) is used in Signal, WhatsApp, Viber, Chat X.509 v2.

Ephemeral

Session keys derived from ephemeral ECDH; provides forward secrecy for the session duration but not per-message. Ephemeral without ratchet is used in Threema, Session, Chat X.509 v1.

Post-Compromise Security

Double Ratchet

Asymmetric DH ratchet introduces fresh entropy, allowing recovery of confidentiality after temporary state compromise. Double Ratchet is used in Signal, WhatsApp, Viber, Chat X.509 v2.

Standards and Format of Messages

Integrating X.509 public key infrastructure (PKI) into a secure messaging system like Chat X.509 enables seamless interoperability with existing corporate PKI deployments, which are already widely used for VPN access, secure email (S/MIME), code signing, and device authentication. Enterprises maintaining internal certificate authorities (CA) or relying on commercial CA can directly issue and manage user certificates for Chat X.509 without introducing parallel key management systems. This reduces administrative overhead, eliminates the need for separate identity registration processes, and allows organizations to enforce existing policies—such as mandatory key strengths, expiration periods, or role-based certificate attributes—directly within the messaging application. Revocation is handled through standard mechanisms like Certificate Revocation Lists (CRL) and Online Certificate Status Protocol (OCSP), ensuring that compromised credentials can be disabled instantly across all services, a capability that decentralized or self-signed key systems typically lack. For large organizations, this integration translates into lower deployment costs, simplified auditing, and consistent security governance across communication tools.

On the governmental side, X.509 PKI integration aligns Chat X.509 with national digital identity frameworks and official secure communication standards, many of which are built on X.509 certificates (e.g., eIDAS in the European Union, federal PKI in the United States, or national eID card systems). Agencies can leverage existing trusted root CAs to authenticate users and devices, enabling secure, verifiable communications between government entities, contractors, and citizens without requiring proprietary key distribution. This supports regulatory compliance (e.g., FISMA, GDPR, or critical infrastructure protection directives) and facilitates controlled information sharing in sensitive environments.

By binding long-term identity keys and signing prekeys with standard X.509 certificates, Chat X.509 preserves end-to-end encryption and modern secrecy properties (in v2) while inheriting the robust trust model, revocation infrastructure, and legal recognition that established governmental PKIs provide—advantages that purely decentralized protocols cannot match in regulated or hierarchical settings.

The key features of X.509 wrapped security:

- Identity keys are bound in standard X.509 certificates.
- Prekeys/one-time prekeys are signed by the certificate's private key.
- Clients can validate certificates against enterprise trust stores or public roots.
- Revocation via CRL/OCSP, policy enforcement, interoperability with existing PKI tooling.

Encryption Schemes

Signal and WhatsApp

The Signal Protocol combines the Extended Triple Diffie–Hellman (X3DH) key agreement with the Double Ratchet for per-message key evolution. This design provides both forward secrecy and post-compromise security while supporting asynchronous message delivery and out-of-order message processing.

Parameter	Signal	WhatsApp
Key Agreement	X25519 (X3DH + 2-Ratchet)	X25519 (X3DH + 2-Ratchet)
Identity / Long-term	X25519 + Ed25519 signing	X25519 + Ed25519 signing
Key Derivation	HKDF (SHA-256/512)	HKDF (SHA-256/512)
Symmetric Encryption	AES-256-CBC	AES-256-CBC
Authentication / MAC	HMAC-SHA256	HMAC-SHA256
Authenticated Encryption	AES-256-CBC /w HMAC-SHA256	AES-256-CBC /w HMAC-SHA256
Forward Secrecy	Yes (Double Ratchet)	Yes (Double Ratchet)
Post-Compromise Security	Yes	Yes
Standards / Format	Custom binary	Custom binary (Signal)

The choice of Curve25519 reflects a preference for modern, implementation-resistant curves over legacy NIST curves. AES-256-CBC with HMAC-SHA256 was selected for its proven security and widespread support. WhatsApp inherits this design but modifies group key management (Sender Keys) to scale to very large user bases.

Chat X.509

Parameter	Chat X.509 v1	Chat X.509 v2
Key Agreement	NIST P-256 ECDH	X25519 (X3DH + 2-Ratchet)
Identity / Long-term	X.509 cert secp256r1 key	X.509 cert X25519 key
Key Derivation	HKDF-SHA256	HKDF-SHA256
Symmetric Encryption	ChaCha20	ChaCha20
Authentication / MAC	16-byte Poly1305 tag	16-byte Poly1305 tag
Authenticated Encryption	ChaCha20-Poly1305	ChaCha20-Poly1305
Forward Secrecy	Ephemeral Static	Yes (2-Ratchet)
Post-Compromise Security	No	Yes (2-Ratchet)
Standards / Format	X.509 X.894 X.680 X.690	X.509 X.894 X.680 X.690

This protocol integrates traditional X.509 public-key infrastructure with NIST P-256 and CMS enveloped data formats. The design favors interoperability with enterprise PKI environments and standards-based tooling over modern secrecy properties. The lack of ratcheting is a deliberate simplification, trading advanced security for compatibility.

Session and Threema

Session uses libsodium sealed boxes and Argon2id for memory-hard key derivation, reflecting a focus on resistance to offline attacks and decentralized routing. Like Threema, it omits ratcheting to reduce complexity and state requirements, accepting the absence of post-compromise security.

Threema adopts the NaCl/libsodium cryptographic API, using XSalsa20-Poly1305 for encryption and Curve25519 for key agreement without ratcheting. The design prioritizes implementation simplicity, constant-time execution, and low latency over post-compromise recovery. This choice is reasonable for a system emphasizing minimal server-side state and moderate group sizes (up to 256 members).

Parameter	Threema	Session
Key Agreement	Curve25519 ECDH (Ephemeral)	Ed25519-X25519
Identity / Long-term	Curve25519 key pair	Ed25519-X25519
Key Derivation	HSalsa20	Argon2id
Symmetric Encryption	XSalsa20	XChaCha20
Authentication / MAC	Poly1305	Poly1305
Authenticated Encryption	XSalsa20-Poly1305	XChaCha20-Poly1305
Forward Secrecy	Ephemeral (session)	Ephemeral (session)
Post-Compromise Security	No	No
Standards / Format	Custom binary (NaCl-inspired)	libsodium sealed boxes

Telegram Secret Chats and Viber

Parameter	Telegram Secret Chats	Viber
Key Agreement	2048-bit Diffie-Hellman	X25519 (X3DH + 2-Ratchet)
Identity / Long-term	Server-mediated	Ed25519 + X25519
Key Derivation	Custom SHA-1/SHA-256	HKDF-SHA256
Symmetric Encryption	AES-256-IGE	AES-256-CBC
Authentication / MAC	Custom SHA-256	HMAC-SHA256
Authenticated Encryption	IGE + custom MAC	AES-256-CBC /w HMAC-SHA256
Forward Secrecy	Limited	Yes (Double Ratchet)
Post-Compromise Security	No	Yes
Standards / Format	MTPROTO 2.0	Custom (Signal-inspired)

Conclusion

All examined protocols currently offer low quantum resistance due to their reliance on elliptic curves vulnerable to Shor's algorithm. Hybrid post-quantum constructions (e.g., PQXDH combining X25519 with lattice-based key encapsulation mechanisms ML-KEM) are already being deployed experimentally in Signal-based applications. The ongoing standardization of Messaging Layer Security (MLS) promises improved group key management with forward secrecy and post-compromise security at scale.

The cryptographic design choices in secure messengers reflect different priorities: maximal secrecy properties (Signal, WhatsApp), implementation simplicity and performance (Threema, Session), or standards compliance and interoperability (Chat X.509 v1). As quantum threats mature and group messaging requirements grow, future protocols will likely combine hybrid post-quantum key exchange, ratchet-based secrecy, and MLS-style group management.

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