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To cite this version:

HAL Id: hal-01959560
https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01959560
Submitted on 18 Dec 2018

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Secure compilation of side-channel countermeasures: 
the case of cryptographic “constant-time”

Gilles Barthe*, Benjamin Grégoire†, Vincent Laporte*
*IMDEA Software Institute, Madrid, Spain
gilles.barthe@imdea.org vlaporte@imdea.org
†Inria, Sophia-Antipolis, France
benjamin.gregoire@inria.fr

Abstract—Software-based countermeasures provide effective 
mitigation against side-channel attacks, often with minimal ef-

ciciency and deployment overheads. Their effectiveness is often 
amenable to rigorous analysis: specifically, several popular coun-
termeasures can be formalized as information flow policies, and 
correct implementation of the countermeasures can be verified 
with state-of-the-art analysis and verification techniques. How-
ever, in absence of further justification, the guarantees only hold
for the language (source, target, or intermediate representation)
on which the analysis is performed.

We consider the problem of preserving side-channel counter-
measures by compilation for cryptographic “constant-time”, a 
popular countermeasure against cache-based timing attacks. We 
present a general method, based on the notion of constant-time
simulation, for proving that a compilation pass preserves the 
constant-time countermeasure. Using the Coq proof assistant, we 
verify the correctness of our method and of several representative 

I. INTRODUCTION

Side-channel attacks are physical attacks in which malicious 
parties extract confidential and otherwise protected data from
observing the physical behavior of systems. Side-channel
attacks are also among the most effective attack vectors
against cryptographic implementations, as witnessed by an
impressive stream of side-channel attacks against prominent

cryptographic libraries. Many of these attacks fall under the
general class of timing-based attacks, i.e. they exploit the
execution time of programs. In their simplest form, timing-
based side-channel attacks only use very elementary facts about
execution time [20], [12]: for instance, branching on secrets
may leak confidential information, as the two branches may
have different execution times. Further instances of these attacks
include [2], [1]. However, advanced forms of timing-based
side-channel attacks also exploit facts about the underlying
architecture. Notably, cache-based timing attacks exploit the
latency between cache hits and cache misses. Cache-based
timing attacks have been used repeatedly to retrieve almost
instantly cryptographic keys from implementations of AES
and other libraries—see for example [9], [28], [31], [17],
[23], [32], [16]. Similarly, data timing channels exploit the
timing variability of specific operations—i.e. operations whose
execution time depends on their arguments [24].

Numerous countermeasures have been developed in response
to these attacks. Hardware-based countermeasures propose
solutions based on modifications of the micro-architecture,

1The terminology “constant-time” is well established in the cryptographic
community, but may be confusing for a broader audience, so we shall often
(but not always) use the expression “cryptographic constant-time” to minimize
risks of confusion.
To address this problem, we propose a general method for proving that cryptographic constant-time is preserved by compilation. Our method is based on constant-time-simulation (CT-simulation), which adapts to our problem the usual notion of simulation from compiler verification. As for simulations, CT-simulations come in several flavours (lockstep, manysteps, and general); each of them establishes preservation of constant-time. Crucially, preservation proofs are modular: compiler correctness is assumed, and does not need to be re-established. This allows for a neat separation of concerns and incremental proofs (e.g. first prove compiler correctness, then preservation of constant-time), and eases future applications of our method to existing verified compilers. We prove the correctness of our framework and demonstrate its usefulness by deriving preservation of cryptographic constant-time for a representative set of compiler optimizations. Our proofs are formally verified using the Coq proof assistant.\textsuperscript{2}

Overall, our work lays previously missing theoretical foundations for preservation of cryptographic constant-time, a popular software-based side-channel countermeasures by compilation.

Summary of contributions: The main technical contributions of the paper include:
- we provide a general method to prove preservation of cryptographic constant-time by compilation;
- we study common classes of compilation passes and prove that they preserve cryptographic constant-time;
- we provide mechanized proofs of correctness of our method, and of the instantiations to specific optimizations.

II. CRYPTOGRAPHIC CONSTANT-TIME

Timing attacks are common and very efficient methods to break cryptographic schemes. The most famous one is certainly the attack on the square-and-multiply algorithm used in modular exponentiation. The algorithm that should compute $x^k \mod p$ can be implemented as follows (in pseudo-code):

\[
\begin{align*}
  r &= 1; \\
  \text{for}(i = \text{base} - 1; 0 <= i; --i) \{ \\
    & \quad r = (r * r) \mod p; \\
    & \quad \text{if} \ ((k >> i) & 1) \ r = (r * x) \mod p;
  \}
\end{align*}
\]

At each iteration $r$ contains the value of $x^{2^i}$, each loop iteration squares $r$ and if the bit at $i$ is 1 then $r$ is multiplied by $x$. If an attacker can measure the time taken by each iteration of the loop, it can distinguish between the iteration where the tested bit of $k$ is 0 or 1. A solution to fix the problem is to systematically execute the second multiplication and then correct the value of $r$ using a conditional move.

\[
\begin{align*}
  \text{for}(i = \text{base} - 1; 0 <= i; --i) \{ \\
    & \quad r = (r * r) \mod p; \\
    & \quad r' = (r * x) \mod p; \\
    & \quad r = ((k >> i) & 1) \ ? \ r' : r;
  \}
\end{align*}
\]

\textsuperscript{2}The whole development is available at https://sites.google.com/view/ctpreservation

The last instruction can be implemented using a linear combination if the architecture does not provide a constant-time cmov instruction. Importantly, the modified implementations are secure in the program counter model, i.e. their control flow does not depend on secrets.

However, program counter security does not always suffice to protect implementations, as monitoring of shared resources can be exploited by a malicious party to recover information. For instance, cache attacks exploit the latency between cache misses and cache hits to observe whether memory accesses have been performed. Early examples of cache attacks were demonstrated by Percival \cite{28} on an OpenSSL implementation of RSA, and by Bernstein \cite{9} and Osvik, Shamir and Tromer \cite{31} on implementations of AES based on lookup tables.

One popular solution is then to require that memory accesses, as well as control-flow, should not depend of secret data. This policy, known as “constant-time” policy in the cryptography literature, has become a de facto standard for cryptographic implementations—as well as the terminology, which is somewhat misleading, as no explicit reasoning about execution time is involved in the formal definition of constant-time program. Recently, Barthe et al \cite{5} show that constant-time implementations are protected against cache attacks in an idealized model of virtualization.

This is not to say that the notion of cryptographic constant-time is an absolute guarantee against side-channel attacks. For instance, elementary operations such as multiplication and division are not constant-time on many popular architectures. Worse, recent attacks exploit speculative execution to retrieve confidential information from constant-time implementations \cite{19}. However, the constant-time policy remains a useful guideline for writing secure implementations.

In this paper, we study the impact of compiler optimizations on the constant-time policy. It is well-known that compilers may turn source programs that satisfy cryptographic constant-time into target programs that are not constant-time. For a concrete example, consider the code snippet:

\[
\begin{align*}
  \text{int mask = -b;} \\
  x &= (y \& mask) \mid (x \& \neg \text{mask});
\end{align*}
\]

This snippet, which has the same effect as move instruction ($x = y ? b : x$), is trivially constant-time. Unfortunately the clang compiler version 5.0 using flags -O2 -m32 -march=i686 compiles it into assembly code equivalent to if (b) $x = y$.

More generally, a classical example of program where the constant-time policy is broken by compilation is string equality. String equality is generally implemented by a library function and it is generally viewed as a non-leaking function at source level; however, it can be compiled to a loop which early exits when two bytes differ. Thus, the low-level program may reveal the first position where the two input bitstrings differ, and hence is not constant-time—assuming that the bitstrings are secret.

Lazy operations are another good example where branching instructions may be introduced during compilation. For example, in $x = f(k) \&\& g(z)$ might be compiled into $x = f(k)$; if $x$ then...
x = g(z); thus a branching on a secret may appear and the final program may not be constant-time.

For a more recent example, Kaufmann et al. [18] build a timing attack against an implementation of the scalar product on an elliptic curve that is constant-time (assuming that the 64-bit multiplication does not leak information about its operands). Indeed, in that setting, the compiler optimizes the multiplications so that they run faster on small values, resulting in an information leak.

### III. Problem Statement

#### A. Observational non-interference

We focus on programs that carry an explicit notion of leakage. In our setting, leakage is modelled as lists of atomic leakages. We let $\mathcal{L}$ denote the list of atomic leakages, and use $\cdot$ to denote concatenation of lists. We also use $[a]$ to denote the list with a single element $a$, and $\emptyset$ to denote the empty list.

We model the behavior of programs using an instrumented operational semantics given by labelled transitions of the form

$$a \xrightarrow{t} a',$$

where $a$ and $a'$ are states and $t$ is the leakage associated to the one step execution from $a$ to $a'$. We shall sometimes write $a \rightarrow a'$ when $t$ is irrelevant.

We assume that the semantics is deterministic, i.e., for all $a, a_1, a_2 \in S$ and $t_1, t_2 \in \mathcal{L}$,

$$(a \xrightarrow{t_1} a_1 \land a \xrightarrow{t_2} a_2) \implies (a_1 = a_2 \land t_1 = t_2).$$

The assumption of deterministic semantics simplifies the formal treatment, and is fully compatible with the intended application domain—in particular, all recent languages for writing high-speed cryptographic software have a deterministic semantics.

We define multi-step execution $a \xrightarrow{t^+} a'$ by the clauses:

$$a \xrightarrow{t} a' \quad \xrightarrow{t'} a'' \implies a \xrightarrow{t^+} a''$$

We also define $n$-step execution similarly:

$$a \xrightarrow{t^n} a' \quad a \xrightarrow{t'^n} a'' \implies a \xrightarrow{t^n} a''$$

Observational non-interference is defined for complete executions. Therefore, we must introduce notions of initial and final states.

Final states are modelled by a distinguished subset $S_f$ of final states, such that $a \xrightarrow{t} a'$ implies $a \notin S_f$. The converse may fail, i.e. $a \notin S_f$ does not imply the existence of a state $a'$ and leakage $t$ such that $a \xrightarrow{t} a'$. We write $a \downarrow t$, iff there exists a final state $a' \in S_f$ such that $a \xrightarrow{t} a'$.

In view to instantiate our general framework to a standard imperative language, where all the initial states of program $P$ are of the form $\{\rho, P\}$, where $\rho$ is an environment, we assume a type $\mathcal{I}$ of input parameters and we see a program $P$ as a function mapping input parameters to initial states. Therefore the set of initial states of program $P$ is defined as $P(\mathcal{I})$. It is important to note that the set $\mathcal{I}$ of inputs shall be shared by all languages involved in the compilation chain considered in this paper.

We next define the notion of observationally non-interfering program.

**Definition 1** (Observationally non-interfering program). A program $P$ is observationally non-interfering w.r.t. a binary relation $\phi$ on states, written $P \models ONI(\phi)$, iff for all states $a, a' \in P(\mathcal{I})$ and $b, b' \in S$ and $t, t' \in \mathcal{L}$ and $n \in \mathbb{N}$,

$$a \xrightarrow{t^n} b \land a' \xrightarrow{t'^n} b' \land \phi a a' \implies t = t' \land (b \in S_f \iff b' \in S_f).$$

Our notion of observational non-interference entails a weaker but more intuitive termination-insensitive notion. Specifically, if $P$ is observationally non-interfering w.r.t. a relation $\phi$, then for all states $a, a' \in P(\mathcal{I})$ and $t, t' \in \mathcal{L}$,

$$a \downarrow t \land a' \downarrow t' \land \phi a a' \implies t = t'.$$

#### B. Secure compilation

For convenience, we restrict our attention to safe programs.

**Definition 2** (Safety). We say that a state $a$ is safe, written $safe(a)$, iff $a \in S_f$ or there exists $a \in S$ such that $a \rightarrow a'$. We say that a program $P$ is safe iff for every $a \in P(\mathcal{I})$, for every $a' \in S$ such that $a \xrightarrow{t^+} a'$, $a'$ is safe.

The problem addressed in this paper is an instance of secure compilation.

**Definition 3** (Security-preserving compiler). Assume given source and target languages, and let $\phi$ and $\phi'$ be binary relations on source and target states. Let $[]$ be a compiler from source to target programs. $[]$ is security-preserving for $(\phi, \phi')$ iff for every program $P$:

$$P \models ONI(\phi) \land safe(P) \implies []P \models ONI(\phi')$$

#### C. Discussion

A naive strategy for proving the implication would be to show that leakage is preserved by compilation, i.e. source executions with leakage $t$ is compiled to target executions with equal leakage $t$. Such a strategy can be implemented using an adaptation of the standard notion of simulation, which we describe in the next section.

However, this strategy fails for most optimizations—and moreover, source and target languages do not even need to support the same notion of leakage. The failure of the naive strategy forces us to consider an alternative strategy inspired from unwinding lemmas, a standard technique for proving that programs satisfy an information flow policies.

Informally, unwinding lemmas are parametrized by an unwinding relation and come in two flavours: *locally preserves* unwinding lemmas show that one-step executions started in two states related by the unwinding relation yield states that are related by the unwinding relation, and *step-consistent* unwinding lemmas show that under some conditions, one-step execution yields a state related to the original state, i.e. $a \rightarrow a'$ implies that $a$ and $a'$ are related by the unwinding relation. Step-consistent unwinding lemmas are used for reasoning about
As usual, we model partial functions using a distinguished
leakage respectively. We allow the first function to be partial.

\[ e ::= x \mid n \mid e \circ e \mid a[e] \]
\[ c ::= \text{skip} \mid x = e \mid a[e] = e \mid c \mid \text{if } e \mid c \mid \text{loop } c \]

where \( x \) ranges over variables, \( a \) ranges over arrays and \( e \) ranges over expressions.

Fig. 1: Minimal language

diverging control flow, i.e. when programs branch on secrets, and are not required when executions have the same control
flow. Our method considers only the case of \textit{locally preserves}
unwinding lemmas, and provide sufficient conditions for the
unwinding relation and equality of leakage to be preserved by
compilation. This suffices for the observational non-interference
policies studied in this article.

It is certainly possible to extend our method to provide a
counterpart to step-preserving unwinding lemmas. However, it
remains an open question whether the general framework could
still be instantiated to a broad class of program optimizations.

IV. SETTING

In this section we instantiate observational non-interference
to a specific language and leakage model.

A. Programming language

Usually, compilers use many intermediate languages during
the compilation. Some transformations go from one language
to another, while others stay within the same language. While
our methodology applies to transformations with different input
and output languages, for the sake of simplicity, we try to share
as much as possible the input and output language. The only
transformation where the language changes is the linearization
where the input language is a structured language while the
output is a list of basic instructions with jumps.

For most of the transformations, we consider a minimal
imperative language shown in Figure 1. The type of input
parameters is the set of environments. The language features
a loop construct of the form \( c_1 \, e \, c_2 \). The additional
generality of the construct (over while loops) mildly simplifies
the presentation of some optimizations. For clarity of exposition,
only constant or binary operators are considered for building
expressions.

B. Environments and semantics of expressions

An environment \( \rho \) is a pair \( (\rho_v, \rho_a) \), where \( \rho_v \) is a partial
map from the set \( \mathcal{X} \) of variables to integers, and \( \rho_a \) is a partial
map from \( \mathcal{A} \times \mathcal{Z} \), where \( \mathcal{A} \) is the set of arrays, to integers, i.e.
\( \rho_v : \mathcal{X} \rightarrow \mathcal{Z} \) and \( \rho_a : \mathcal{A} \times \mathcal{Z} \rightarrow \mathcal{Z} \).

Constants are interpreted as integers. The interpretation of a
binary operator \( o \) is given by a pair of functions \( (\sigma, \varrho) \) of type
\( \mathcal{Z} \times \mathcal{Z} \rightarrow \mathcal{Z} \) and \( \mathcal{Z} \times \mathcal{Z} \rightarrow \mathcal{L} \), modelling functional behavior and
leakage respectively. We allow the first function to be partial.
As usual, we model partial functions using a distinguished
value \( \bot \) for undefined and assume that errors propagate.

The interpretation \( [e]_\rho \) and leakage \( \text{leak}(e, \rho) \) of an expres-
sion \( e \) in an environment \( \rho \) are elements of \( \mathcal{Z} \) and \( \mathcal{L} \) respectively.

Figure 2 defines the functions formally. The evaluation of
variables and constants generates no leakage; for operators, the
leakage corresponds to the leakage of subexpressions and the
specific leakage of the operation \( o \; [e_1]_\rho \; [e_2]_\rho \). Note that, as
for other operators, the definition of leakage for array access is
parametrized by a leakage function \( \lambda_a : \mathcal{A} \times \mathcal{Z} \rightarrow \mathcal{L} \).

C. States and semantics of commands

States are pairs of the form \( \{c, \rho\} \) where \( c \) is a command
and \( \rho \) is an environment. We use \( s \cdot \text{cmd} \) and \( s \cdot \text{env} \) to denote the
first and second components of a state. We define initial and
final states to be respectively of the form \( \{P, \rho\} \) and \( \{\text{skip}, \rho\} \),
where \( \rho \) ranges over environments.

The instrumented semantics of commands is modelled by
statements of the form \( \{c, \rho\} \xrightarrow{\rho} \{c', \rho'\} \), and is parametrized by
constants \( \lambda_{\text{skip}}, \lambda_{\text{loop}} \in \mathcal{L} \), functions \( \lambda_v : \mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Z} \rightarrow \mathcal{L} \),
and \( \lambda_d : \mathcal{Z} \rightarrow \mathcal{L} \). We use the standard notation \( \cdot \leftarrow \cdot \) for
updating environments.

The semantics is standard, except for the semantics of loops,
and the definition of the leakage. The loop command
\( c_1 \, e \, c_2 \) first executes \( c_1 \) (unconditionally, as the \textit{do-while}
command), then evaluates \( e \) if \( e \) evaluates to true (i.e. \( [e]_\rho \neq 0 \))
the command \( c_2 \) is executed and the loop command is evaluated
w.r.t. the updated environment (as in the \textit{while-do}), else if \( e \)
evaluates to false (i.e. \( [e]_\rho = 0 \)) the command terminates
immediately.

The leakage of a command is the leakage of the expressions
evaluated during the execution of the command plus a specific
leakage. For array assignment, the specific leakage depends of
the \textit{address} \( \lambda_a(a, [e_1]_\rho) \). For conditional, the leakage
depends of the branch taken.

The following lemma establishes that the instrumented
semantics is deterministic, as required by our setting.

Lemma 1. For all states \( a, \, b, \, b', \) if \( a \xrightarrow{\lambda} b \) and \( a \xrightarrow{\lambda} b' \), then
\( b = b' \) and \( t = t' \).

D. Leakage models

We list several observation policies (all but the last one have
been considered in the literature), and succinctly describe for
each of them the leakage model; Figure 3 summarizes the main
leakage models.

- step-counting policy: the number of execution steps is
  leaked—modelled as the length of a list over the unit type
  (whose element is noted \( \bullet \));
- program counter policy: control flow is leaked. Leakage is a
  list of boolean values containing all guards evaluated during
  this execution;
- memory obliviousness: memory accesses are leaked. Leakage is a
  list of boolean values containing all guards evaluated during
  this execution (but not their value);
- constant-time policy: control flow and memory addresses are
  leaked. It combines the program counter and memory
  obliviousness policies. Leakage is an heterogeneous list of
  booleans and addresses. In all examples in this paper, we
use the non-cancelling variant (see below) of this leakage model;
• cost obliviousness: execution cost is leaked. Leakage is a list
of numbers, representing the cost of each instruction;
• size-respecting policy: size of operands is leaked for specific
operators, e.g. division. Leakage is a list of sizes, taken
from a finite set size;
• constant-time policy with size: control flow, memory ad-
dresses, and size of operands is leaked. Leakage is an
heterogeneous list of booleans, addresses, and sizes.

In all these cases, we require that leakage is equal in two traces
that start from related states. One can weaken these policies in
multiple ways, for instance by requiring equality of the overall
execution cost (obtained by summing the execution cost of
each individual instruction), or by requiring that the difference
of leakage at each individual step (or the global leakage) does
not exceed a given upper bound.

Definition 4. A program $P$ is cryptographic constant-time
w.r.t. $\phi$ iff it is observationally non-interfering w.r.t. $\phi$ in
the constant-time leakage model.

E. Non-cancellation of leakage

Our main results are based on the assumption that leakage
is non-cancelling. Informally, non-cancellation states that
the leakage of an execution uniquely determines the leakage of all
its individual steps, and that the equality of the leakages of
two executions entails the pairwise equality of the leakages of
each of their steps.

It turns out that some leakage models from Figure 3 do not
satisfy the non-cancelling condition. However, in some cases,
one can easily define alternative leakage models that verify the
non-cancelling condition, and which yield equivalent notions
of non-interference. For instance, the program counter and
constant-time policies can be made non-cancelling by replacing
$\epsilon$ leakages by a leakage $\{\bullet\}$, where $\bullet$ is a distinguished element,
to record that one execution step has been performed.

\[\begin{align*}
\{x = e, \rho\} &\rightarrow \text{leak}(e, \rho) \cdot \text{leak}(x, [x]_\rho) \\
\{a[e_1] = e_2, \rho\} &\rightarrow \text{leak}(e_1, \rho) \cdot \text{leak}(e_2, \rho) \cdot \text{leak}(a[e_1], \rho) \\
\{\text{if } e_1 \ e_2, \rho\} &\rightarrow \text{leak}(e_1, \rho) \cdot \text{leak}(e_2, \rho) \\
\{\text{skip; } e_2, \rho\} &\rightarrow \lambda_{\text{loop}}(e_2, \rho) \\
\{\text{loop } e_1 \ e_2, \rho\} &\rightarrow \lambda_e \cdot \lambda_{\text{loop}}(e_2, \rho)
\end{align*}\]

Fig. 2: Instrumented semantics of the while language

Step-counting:
Atomic leakages: $\{\bullet\}$
\[\lambda_{\text{skip}} = \lambda_{\text{loop}} = \lambda_a(a, z) = \lambda_v(v, z) = \lambda_h(z) = [\bullet]\]

Program counter:
Atomic leakages: $B$
\[\lambda_{\text{skip}} = \lambda_{\text{loop}} = \lambda_a(a, z) = \lambda_v(v, z) = \epsilon \quad \lambda_h(z) = [z \neq 0]\]

Memory obliviousness:
Atomic leakages: $\mathcal{X} + (A \times \mathbb{N})$
\[\lambda_{\text{skip}} = \lambda_{\text{loop}} = \lambda_a(a, z) = \lambda_v(v, z) = \epsilon \quad \lambda_h(z) = [z \neq 0]\]

Constant-time:
Atomic leakages: $B + (A \times \mathbb{Z})$
\[\lambda_{\text{skip}} = \lambda_{\text{loop}} = \epsilon \quad \lambda_h(z) = [z \neq 0]\]

Size non-interference:
Size $\mathcal{L} \triangleq \text{size}$
\[\lambda_{\text{skip}} = \lambda_{\text{loop}} = \lambda_a(a, z) = \lambda_v(v, z) = \epsilon\]

Cost obliviousness:
Atomic leakages: $N$
\[\lambda_{\text{skip}} = \lambda_{\text{loop}} = \lambda_a(a, z) = \lambda_v(v, z) = \lambda_h(z) = \epsilon\]

In the first two models only commands leak. In the last two
models only expressions leak.

Fig. 3: Leakage models

F. Relations on initial states

The relations $\phi$ considered in the literature generally rep-
resent low equivalence, and are defined relative to a security
lattice and a security environment. We consider a lattice
with two security levels: $H$, or high, for secret and $L$, or
low, for public. Then, a security environment is a mapping
from variables and arrays to security levels. Finally, two
environments $\rho$ and $\rho'$ are low equivalent w.r.t. a security environment $\Gamma$ iff they map public variables and arrays to the same values, i.e. $\rho(x) = \rho'(x)$ for all variables $x$ such that $\Gamma(x) = L$ and $\rho_\alpha(a, i) = \rho'_\alpha(a, i)$ for all arrays $a$ such that $\Gamma(a) = L$ and every $i \in \mathbb{N}$.

V. LOCKSTEP CONSTANT-TIME SIMULATIONS

We present a simple method for proving preservation of cryptographic constant-time, corresponding to lockstep simulations. Moreover, we instantiate our method to constant folding and spilling. Refinements of the method to manysteps and general simulations are provided in the next sections.

A. Framework

We start by recalling the standard notion of simulation from compiler verification. In the simplest (lockstep) setting, one requires that the simulation relation relates one step of execution of a source program $S$ with one step execution of its compiled version $C$, as shown in Figure 4a, in which black represents the hypotheses and red the conclusions. The horizontal arrows require that the simulation relation relates one step of execution $\alpha \rightarrow \beta$ from state $\alpha$ to state $\beta$. The relation $\cdot \equiv \cdot$ relates execution states of the source and of the target program.

**Definition 5** (Lockstep simulation). $\approx$ is a lockstep simulation when:

- for every source step $a \rightarrow b$, and every target state $\alpha$ such that $a \equiv \alpha$, there exist a target state $\beta$ and a target execution step $\alpha \rightarrow \beta$ such that end states are related: $b \equiv \beta$;
- for every input parameter $i$, we have $S(i) \equiv C(i)$;
- for all source and target states $a$ and $b$ such that $b \equiv \beta$, we have $a$ is a final source state iff $\beta$ is a final target state.

The following lemma follows from the assumption that all our languages have a deterministic semantics.

**Lemma 2.** Assume that $\approx$ is a simulation. Then for all target execution step $\alpha \rightarrow \beta$ and safe source state $a$ such that $a \equiv \alpha$, there exists a source execution step $a \rightarrow b$ such that $b \equiv \beta$.

Our method is based on constant-time simulations, a new proof technique adapted from the simulation technique in compiler verification. Whereas simulations are proved by 2-dimensional diagram chasing, constant-time simulations are proved by 3-dimensional diagram chasing. Figure 4b illustrates the definition of constant-time simulation, for the lockstep case. It introduces relations $\cdot \equiv_S \cdot$ and $\cdot \equiv_C \cdot$ between source and target states, depicted with a triple line in the diagram. Horizontal arrows represent one step executions (as before), but we now consider two executions at source level and two executions at target level.

**Definition 6** (Lockstep CT-simulation). $(\equiv_S, \equiv_C)$ is a lockstep CT-simulation with respect to $\approx$ iff

- For all source steps $a \rightarrow b$ and $a' \rightarrow b'$ such that $a \equiv_S a'$ and for every pair of target steps $\alpha \rightarrow \beta$ and $\alpha' \rightarrow \beta'$ such that $a \equiv \alpha$ and $a' \equiv \alpha'$ and $\alpha \equiv_C \alpha'$ and $b \equiv \beta$ and $b' \equiv \beta'$, we have $b \equiv_S b'$ and $\beta \equiv_C \beta'$ and $\tau = \tau'$;
- For every pair of input parameters $i$, $i'$ s.t. $\phi i \phi i'$, we have $S(i) \equiv_S S(i')$ and $C(i) \equiv_C C(i')$.

The notion of constant-time simulation is tailored to make the $\cdot \equiv \cdot$ relation stable by reduction, and to yield preservation of the constant-time policy. This is captured by the next theorem, where $\phi$ is the relation on input parameters —it is useful to think about $\phi$ as low-equivalence between memories—and $\equiv_S$ and $\equiv_C$ are two relations on source and target states—it is useful to think about $\equiv_S$ and $\equiv_C$ as equivalence of code pointer, i.e. the two states point to the same instruction.

**Theorem 1** (Preservation of constant-time policy). Let $S$ be a safe source program and $C$ be the target program obtained by compilation. If $S$ is constant-time w.r.t. $\phi$ then $C$ is constant-time w.r.t. $\phi$. provided the following holds:

1) $\approx$ is a lockstep simulation;
2) $(\equiv_S, \equiv_C)$ is lockstep CT-simulation w.r.t. $\approx$.

**Proof sketch.** Consider two target executions

$$a_1 \rightarrow_1 \ldots \rightarrow_\tau \alpha_{m+1} \quad \alpha_1' \rightarrow_1 \ldots \rightarrow_{\tau_1'} \alpha'_{n+1}$$

starting in related states, i.e. $\phi a_1 \alpha_1$, and such that $\alpha_{m+1}$ and $\alpha'_{n+1}$ are final states. We must show that $m = n$ and $\tau = \tau'$ for every $1 \leq i \leq n$. By safety of $S$ and 1) and Lemma 2, there exist source executions

$$a_1 \rightarrow_1 \ldots \rightarrow_\tau \alpha_{m+1} \quad \alpha_1' \rightarrow_1 \ldots \rightarrow_{\tau_1'} \alpha'_{n+1}$$

such that $\phi a_1 \alpha_1'$ and $\alpha_i \equiv \alpha_i$ for every $1 \leq i \leq m + 1$ and $\alpha'_i \equiv \alpha'_i$ for every $1 \leq i \leq n + 1$. Moreover, by 1) $\alpha_{m+1}$ and $\alpha'_{n+1}$ are final states, and by 2) $\alpha_1 \equiv_C \alpha'_1$ and $a_1 \equiv_S a'_1$. By the constant-time property of $S$, $m = n$ and $\tau_i = \tau'_i$ for every $1 \leq i \leq n$. We next reason by induction on $i$, applying 2) to conclude that $\alpha_i \equiv_C \alpha'_i$ and $\alpha_i \equiv_S \alpha'_i$ and $\tau_i = \tau'_i$, as desired.

Theorem 1 reduces proving constant-time of preservation to proving the existence of a simulation $\approx$ and a constant-time simulation $(\equiv_S, \equiv_C)$ relative to $\approx$. Furthermore, both goals can be proved independently. This separation of concerns limits the proof effort and support modular proofs. In particular, when the compiler is already proved correct (by showing a simulation $\approx$), one only needs to show that there exists a constant-time simulation w.r.t. $\approx$.

B. Examples

1) **Constant folding:** We illustrate the general scheme for proving preservation of the constant-time policy, taking constant folding as example. This simple optimization searches for constant expressions and replaces them by their value in the program text. Technically, constant folding traverses the program and replaces expressions op $e_1$ $e_2$ by simpler expressions if $e_1$ or $e_2$ evaluate to distinguished constants. The simplification rules for multiplication work as follows: if both subexpressions compile to known values $n_1$ and $n_2$
respectively, the compilation is the constant $n_1 \times n_2$; otherwise, if one of the arguments compiles to the constant 1 then the result is the compilation of the other. The most interesting case is if one of the argument compiles to 0. In this case, the result is the constant 0 (independently of the other argument).

We use the lockstep simulation technique to prove that constant-folding preserves the constant-time policy. Our first step is to prove that the constant-folding satisfies the lockstep diagram for simulation. To this end, we consider the relation $a \approx \alpha$ is defined by

$$\llbracket a \cdot \text{cmd} \rrbracket = a \cdot \text{cmd} \land a \cdot \text{env} = \alpha \cdot \text{env}.$$  

**Lemma 3.** The relation $\approx$ is lockstep simulation invariant.

The proof of this lemma is based on the fact that if an expression $e$ has a semantics in a given environment $\rho$ (i.e. $[e]_\rho = n$) then its compilation has the same semantics, $[[e]]_\rho = n$.

Our next step is to prove that the transformation satisfies the lockstep diagram for constant-time simulation. To this end, we use for the $\equiv$ relations the equality of commands $a \equiv a'$ defined by $a \cdot \text{cmd} = a' \cdot \text{cmd}$.

**Lemma 4.** $(\equiv, \equiv)$ is a lockstep CT-simulation w.r.t. $\approx$.

The proof of this lemma is based on the fact that if an expression $e$ has a (instrumented) semantics in both environments and the leakages coincide (i.e. $[e]_\rho = n$ and $[e]'_\rho = n'$ and $\text{leak}(e, \rho) = \text{leak}(e, \rho')$), then the compilation of $e$ generates the same leakage in both environments, i.e.

$$\text{leak}([[e]], \rho) = \text{leak}([[e]]', \rho').$$

It follows that constant folding preserves the constant-time property.

**Theorem 2.** Constant-folding preserves the constant-time policy.

2) **Register allocation and spilling:** Register allocation is a compilation pass that maps an unbounded set of variables into a finite set of registers. In order to preserve the semantics of programs, it is often necessary that the target program stores the value of some variables on the stack, effectively turning variable accesses into memory accesses. Formally, register allocation produces for every program point a mapping from program variables to registers or stack variables (interpreted as an integer denoting the relative position in the stack). Finding optimal assignments that minimize register spilling is a hard problem, and is commonly solved using translation validation. Specifically, computing the assignment is performed by an external program, and a verified checker verifies that the assignment is compatible with the semantics of programs. Formally, we use a distinguished array that is not used in the source program to model the stack. We let $\sigma$ be the assignment output by register allocation: it maps each source variable to either a variable or a position in the stack array.

Proving the correctness of register allocation is relatively easy. The proof relies the correctness of the liveness analysis which underlies register allocation. Preservation of the constant-time policy is more interesting, because spilling introduces new memory reads and writes. The crucial observation is that the addresses leaked by spilling do not depend on the memory, since they are at a constant offset relative to the top of the stack. Thus, the proof of the CT-simulation diagram does not pose any specific difficulties. For both proofs, we use $a \equiv \alpha$ defined by $\llbracket a \cdot \text{cmd} \rrbracket = a \cdot \text{cmd} \land \forall x. (a \cdot \text{env}(x) = \alpha \cdot \text{env}(\sigma(x)))$.

**Theorem 3.** $\approx$ is lockstep simulation invariant. $(\equiv, \equiv)$ is a lockstep CT-simulation relative to $\approx$. Variable spilling preserves the constant-time policy.

**Remark 1.** Following [4], our formalization separates register allocation in two steps. The first step performs some form of variable renaming and defines for every program point a mapping from source variables to target variables. The second step performs spilling, and defines a single, global, mapping from variables to variables or stack variables. Furthermore, the mapping must be the identity for variables that are mapped to variables.

This proof can be extended to a more complex language with function calls and a stack pointer. The difficulty here is that a stack address will not be a constant $k$ but relative to the top of the stack $\text{stk} + k$. Then, when proving preservation of constant-time we have to show that introduced leaks are equal in two different executions, i.e. $\text{stk}_1 + k = \text{stk}_2 + k$ where $\text{stk}_i$ correspond to the value of the stack pointer in execution $i$. So we have to ensure equality of stack pointers. This can be done by a small modification of the $\equiv$ predicate of the target language, so that it imposes equality of commands and of stack pointers. Since the value of the stack pointer only depends on the control flow of the program and that preservation of constant-time already requires equality of the control flow, establishing equality of stack pointers adds no difficulty.

**VI. MANYSTEPS CONSTANT-TIME SIMULATIONS**

The requirement of lockstep execution is often too strong in practice. For illustrative purposes, consider the nonsensical transformation that replaces every atomic instruction $i$ by skip; $i$. Every single execution step of the source program will correspond to two execution steps of the target program (so it
does not correspond to the lockstep simulation). There exist alternative notions of simulations which relax the requirement on lockstep executions by allowing more than one step of execution (i.e. manysteps), as shown on Figure 5a. We show that an equivalent relaxation exists for CT-simulations.

A. Framework

Recall that the constant-time simulation diagram considers two instances of the simulation diagram. It is not enough to simply consider two pairs of traces satisfying the previous diagram. To understand how this is an issue, assume a compilation pass (similar to our add skip transformation) that transforms the fictitious program “\(\ell;\) GOTO \(\ell'\)” into “\(\ell;\) NOP; GOTO \(\ell'\).” Every two steps of target execution returns to the same state. A simulation relation will necessarily relate the source state to some target state \(\alpha\), and given the hypotheses of the constant-time simulation diagram \((a \approx \alpha, a \rightarrow a, \text{and} \; \alpha \rightarrow \beta)\) it is generally not possible to tell how many loop iterations separate the two occurrences of the target state \(\beta\) (hence to prove that any two such target executions have the same length).

To overcome this issue, the simulation diagram is refined to predict how many steps of the target will correspond to each step of the source. This information is usually implicit in the simulation proof; we only make it explicit to be used in the constant-time simulation diagram.

Formally, we introduce a function \(\text{num-steps}(a, \alpha)\) which, assuming that \(a\) and \(\alpha\) are two reachable states related by the simulation relation, predicts how many steps of the target semantics are to be run starting from \(\alpha\) to close the manysteps simulation diagram.

**Definition 7** (Manysteps simulation). \(\approx\) is a manysteps simulation w.r.t. \(\text{num-steps}\) when:

- for all source steps \(a \rightarrow b\), and every target state \(\alpha\) such that \(a \approx \alpha\), there exist a target state \(\beta\) and target execution \(\alpha \rightarrow^n \beta\), where \(n = \text{num-steps}(a, \alpha)\), such that end states are related: \(b \approx \beta\);  
- for every input parameter \(i\), we have \(S(i) \approx C(i)\);  
- for all source and target states \(b\) and \(\beta\) such that \(b \approx \beta\), we have \(b\) is a final source state iff \(\beta\) is a final target state.

Given such a simulation diagram, it is possible to build the constant-time simulation diagram that universally quantifies over two instances of this diagram, as depicted on Figure 5b. The diagram reads as follows.

**Definition 8** (Manysteps CT-diagram). A pair of relations \((\equiv_S, \equiv_C)\) is a manysteps CT-simulation w.r.t. \(\approx\) and \(\text{num-steps}\) iff the following holds: for all \(a, a', b, b', \alpha, \alpha', \beta, \beta', t, \tau, \tau'\) such that

- initial states are related \(a \equiv_S a'\) and \(\alpha \equiv_C \alpha'\);  
- \(a \xrightarrow{\tau} b\) and \(a' \xrightarrow{\tau'} b'\);  
- \(\alpha \xrightarrow{\tau} \beta\) and \(\alpha' \xrightarrow{\tau'} \beta'\) where \(n = \text{num-steps}(a, \alpha)\) and \(n' = \text{num-steps}(a', \alpha')\);  
- the simulation relation holds \(a \approx \alpha, a' \approx \alpha', b \approx \beta, \text{and} \; b' \approx \beta'\)

we have

- equality of leakage \(\tau = \tau'\) and \(n = n'\),  
- final states are related \(b \equiv_S b'\) and \(\beta \equiv_C \beta'\).

This definition, together with a condition on initial states, enable us to define the manysteps constant-time simulation.

**Definition 9** (Manysteps CT-simulation). A pair of relations \((\equiv_S, \equiv_C)\) is a manysteps CT-simulation relative to \(\approx\) w.r.t. \(\text{num-steps}\) when:

1) \((\equiv_S, \equiv_C)\) satisfy the manysteps CT-diagram w.r.t. \(\approx\) and \(\text{num-steps}\);  
2) for every pair of input parameters \(i, i'\) s.t. \(\phi \; i \; i'\), we have \(S(i) \equiv_S S(i')\) and \(C(i) \equiv_C C(i')\).

**Theorem 4** (Constant-time preservation from manysteps CT-simulation). Let \(S\) be a safe source program and \(C\) be the target program obtained by compilation. If \(S\) is constant-time w.r.t. \(\phi\) then \(C\) is constant-time w.r.t. \(\phi\), provided the following holds, for a given \(\text{num-steps}\) function that is strictly positive:

1) \(\approx\) is a manysteps-simulation w.r.t. \(\text{num-steps}\);  
2) \((\equiv_S, \equiv_C)\) is a manysteps CT-simulation relative to \(\approx\) w.r.t. \(\text{num-steps}\).

B. Example: Expression flattening

The flattening of expressions models the transformation to a 3-address code format: each expression is split into a sequence of assignments and a final expression such that at most one operator appears in each expression. This actually fixes the evaluation order of the sub-expressions. Since the evaluation of an expression is done, after transformation, in several steps, the leakage corresponding to an expression is spread among the leakages of these steps.

The transformed program may use additional variables to store the values of some sub-expressions. Therefore, the set of program variables is extended with names for such temporary values.

The procedure that flattens an expression \(e\) is written \(F(e)\): it returns a pair \((p, e')\) where \(p\) is a prefix command and \(e'\) an expression such that the evaluation of \(p\) followed by the evaluation of \(e'\) yields the same value as the evaluation of \(e\); moreover, the evaluation of \(p\) only modifies fresh temporary variables. The transformation \([\cdot]\) of a program applies \(F\) to each expression \(e\) occurring in that program and inserts the
corresponding prefix just before, as follows—we note \((p, e') = F(e)\):

\[
\begin{align*}
[x = e] &\equiv p; x = e' \\
[\text{if } e \ e_1 \ e_2] &\equiv p; \text{if } e' [e_1] [e_2] \\
[\text{loop } c_1 \ e \ e_2] &\equiv \text{loop } ([c_1]; p) \ e' [c_2]
\end{align*}
\]

Note here that the loop structure of our language conveniently allows not to duplicate the sequence \(p\), as arbitrary instructions can be executed before the loop guard.

The correctness of this transformation states that the source and compiled programs agree on the values of the non-temporary variables. To this end, the relation \(a \approx \alpha\) between states is defined as follows:

\[
[a.\text{cmd}] = \alpha.\text{cmd} \land \forall x, \ a.\text{env}(x) = \alpha.\text{env}(x)
\]

where \(x\) denotes a original program variable (i.e., not a temporary variable introduced by the compilation). The target command is the result of the compilation of the source command and the source and target memories agree on the values of the non-temporary variables.

To show that this relation is a simulation, we must predict the number of target steps corresponding to each source step. For each states \(a\) and \(\alpha\), we define \(\text{num-steps}(a, \alpha)\) as \(1 + n\), where \(n\) is the length of the prefix of the expression that is evaluated during the step starting in \(a\) (if any). By construction, this function is strictly positive. To prove that this pass preserves constant-time, we build a many-steps CT-simulation diagram.

**Theorem 5.** The relation \(\approx\) is a many-steps simulation w.r.t. \(\text{num-steps} \equiv \equiv\) is a many-steps CT-simulation relative to \(\approx\) w.r.t. \(\text{num-steps}\). Expression flattening preserves the constant-time policy.

The main argument is that if two evaluations of an expression in two environments produce the same leakage, then the evaluations after flattening also produce the same leakage. Notice that this transformation may choose any evaluation strategy for the expressions, and that needs not be related to the order that appears in the definition of the leakage of expressions.

**VII. GENERAL CONSTANT-TIME SIMULATIONS**

**A. Framework**

In this section, we relax the condition of CT-simulations by allowing the number \(\text{num-steps}\) to be zero or positive. In addition, we strengthen the assumption of CT-simulation so that one can use that the full source program (and not only the current step) is constant-time. Formally, the definition of the many-steps CT-diagram is complemented with additional hypotheses: initial source states \(a\) and \(a'\) are reachable in \(S\) and are a constant-time pair of states\(^3\); initial target states \(\alpha\) and \(\alpha'\) are reachable in \(C\). Finally, we relax the condition on final states in the simulation: when the source execution terminates the target execution is allowed to take a few more steps.

To allow \(\text{num-steps}\) to be zero, the simulation diagram features an additional constraint: there should be no infinite sequence of source steps that are simulated by an empty sequence of target steps (all source states in the sequence being in relation with a single one target state). This constraint is usually formalized by means of a measure of source states which strictly decreases whenever the corresponding target state stutters.

**Definition 10 (General simulation).** Given a relation \(\approx\) between source and target states, a function \(|\cdot|\) from source states to natural numbers\(^4\), and a function \(\text{num-steps}\) from pairs of source and target states to natural numbers; we say that \(\approx\) is a general simulation w.r.t. \(|\cdot|\) and \(\text{num-steps}\) when:

- for every source step \(a \rightarrow b\) and every target state \(\alpha\) such that \(a \approx \alpha\), there exist a target state \(\beta\) and a target execution \(\alpha \rightarrow^\tau \beta\) where \(n = \text{num-steps}(a, \alpha)\) such that end states are related: \(b \approx \beta\);
- for every source step \(a \rightarrow b\) and every target state \(\alpha\) such that \(a \approx \alpha\) and \(\text{num-steps}(a, \alpha) = 0\), the measure of the source state strictly decreases: \(|a| > |b|\);
- for every final source state \(a\) and every target state \(\alpha\) such that \(a \approx \alpha\), there exist a final target state \(\beta\) and a target execution \(\alpha \rightarrow^\tau \beta\) where \(n = \text{num-steps}(a, \alpha)\) such that end states are related: \(a \approx \beta\).

To allow the target execution to terminate after the source execution, we introduce the following variant of the CT-simulation, depicted on Figure 6.

**Definition 11 (Final CT-diagram).** A pair of relations \((\equiv_S, \equiv_C)\) satisfy the final constant-time diagram w.r.t. \(\approx\) and \(\text{num-steps}\) when the following holds: for all \(a, a', \alpha, \alpha', \beta, \beta', \tau, \tau'\) such that:

- initial states are related \(a \equiv_S a', \alpha \equiv_C \alpha'\);
- initial source states are final \(a, a' \in S_f\);
- there are two target executions \(\alpha \rightarrow^\tau \beta\) and \(\alpha' \rightarrow^{\tau'} \beta'\) where \(n = \text{num-steps}(a, \alpha)\) and \(n' = \text{num-steps}(a', \alpha')\);
- the simulation relation holds \(a \approx \alpha, a' \approx \alpha', a \approx \beta, \) and \(a' \approx \beta'\)

we have

- equality of leakage \(\tau = \tau'\) and \(n = n'\);

\(^3\)Reachable from two states that are related by \(\phi\) through two executions which produce the same leakage.

\(^4\)Any ordered set satisfying the ascending chain condition would be suitable.
end states are related and final \( \beta \equiv C \beta' \), \( \beta, \beta' \in \mathcal{C}_f \).

**Definition 12** (General CT-simulation). Given a relation \( \approx \), a function \( \cdot | \cdot \), and a function \( \text{num-steps} \) as above, we say that the pair of relations \( (\equiv_S, \equiv_C) \) is a (general) CT-simulation when:

1) \( (\equiv_S, \equiv_C) \) satisfy the manysteps CT-diagram w.r.t. \( \approx \) and \( \text{num-steps} \);
2) for every pair of input parameters \( i, i' \) s.t. \( \phi \ i \ i' \), we have \( S(i) \equiv_S S(i') \) and \( C(i) \equiv_C C(i') \);
3) for all related source states \( a \equiv_S a' \), none or both of them are final: \( a \in S_f \iff a' \in S_f \);
4) \( (\equiv_S, \equiv_C) \) satisfy the final CT-diagram w.r.t. \( \approx \) and \( \text{num-steps} \).

**Theorem 6** (Constant-time preservation from general CT-simulation). Let \( S \) be a safe source program and \( C \) be the target program obtained by compilation. If \( S \) is constant-time w.r.t. \( \phi \) then \( C \) is constant-time w.r.t. \( \phi \), provided the following holds, for given \( \text{num-steps} \) and \( \cdot | \cdot \) functions:

1) \( \approx \) is a general simulation w.r.t. \( \cdot | \cdot \) and \( \text{num-steps} \);
2) \( (\equiv_S, \equiv_C) \) is a general CT-simulation w.r.t. \( \approx \), \( \cdot | \cdot \), and \( \text{num-steps} \).

**Remark 2.** In the Coq formalization, we use slightly more convenient definitions in which more hypotheses are available: all considered states are reachable, initial source states \( (a \) and \( a' \) are a constant-time pair of states. This enables proofs to be more modular.

**Remark 3.** The final CT-diagram is not strictly necessary. However, it is a very convenient tool to simplify simulation relations. Without this additional diagram, the simulation relation needs special cases to explain the last steps at the end of the target executions, introducing disjunctions and many extra cases in the proofs. This is similar to, e.g., the lock-step diagram: it is subsumed by the general diagram but much more convenient to use, when possible.

**B. Examples**

1) **Dead branch elimination:** In this section, we present a transformation that we designed for the purpose of illustration: a more general and less artificial version will be discussed in the following section. This transformation removes conditional branches whose conditions are trivially false. More precisely, the compilation function \( \llbracket \cdot \rrbracket \) is defined as depicted on Figure 7. Assignments are kept unchanged; the if instructions whose conditions are trivially false (i.e., the literal 0 is used as guard) are replaced by their else branch (recursively compiled); similarly, loop instructions whose guard is false are removed: only the first part of the loop body is kept (recursively compiled).

To justify the correctness of this transformation, we define a relation \( a \approx \alpha \) between source state \( a \) and target state \( \alpha \) as: \( \alpha = \llbracket a \cdot \text{cmd} \rrbracket, a \cdot \text{env} \); the target command is the compilation of the source command, and both states have the same environment.

Interestingly, this transformation may remove execution steps: the ones corresponding to the evaluation of the trivially false conditions and the unfolding of the removed loops. Therefore, the \( \cdot | \cdot \) relation does not satisfy the lockstep simulation diagram; it satisfies however the more general simulation diagram. To that end, we define the \( \text{num-steps} \)-function as 1 for all states excepted if the current instruction is a conditional on false (if or loop), we also define a measure \( |a| \) of source execution states by taking the full size of \( a \cdot \text{cmd} \). Therefore, this measure strictly decreases when the target takes no step.

**Theorem 7.** \( \approx \) is a general simulation invariant. \( (\equiv_S, \equiv_C) \) is a general CT-simulation relative to \( \approx \), \( \text{num-steps} \) and \( \cdot | \cdot \). Dead branch elimination preserves the constant-time policy.

2) **Constant propagation:** A slightly more interesting variant of the previous transformation is constant propagation: a static analysis prior to the compilation pass infers at each program point which variables hold a statically known constant value; then using this information, each expression can be simplified (as in the constant folding transformation described in § V-B1) and the branches that are trivial after this simplification can be removed.

This transformation, as many other common compilation passes, relies on the availability of a flow-sensitive analysis result: some information must be attached to every program point. As usual, since our language has no explicit program points, we enrich its syntax with annotations. More precisely, each instruction gets one annotation, except the loop which gets two: one that is valid at the beginning of each loop iteration, and one that is valid when evaluating the loop guard. The small-step semantics, when executing a loop, introduces an \( \text{if} \) and a \text{loop}. The annotations to put on the next iteration may depend on the purpose of these annotations; therefore, the semantics is parametrized by a annotate-step function which describes how to compute the annotations of a loop at the next iteration, yielding the following rule for the execution of the loop instruction (decorated letters \( k \) figure the annotations):

\[
\{ \text{loop}^{k_1}_{k_2} c_1 b c_2, \rho \} \rightarrow \{ c_1; \text{if}^{k_2} b \ (c_2; \text{loop}^{k_1}_{k_2} c_1 b c_2) \hspace{1em} \text{skip,} \rho \}
\]

where \( (k_1', k_2') = \text{annotate}(k_1, k_2) \).

In this particular case of constant propagation, we assume that the source program is annotated with partial mappings from variables to constant values (integers). Those annotations are generated by a first pass of analysis and are certified independently. Given this information, the compilation may simplify expressions, remove if whose guard is trivial, and remove loops whose guard is false.
However, the compilation only transforms constructs that syntactically appear in the program source code and does not operate on the constructs that are in the execution state as a result of the semantic execution of the program. In particular, the compilation will not transform a trivial if that results from the execution of a loop whose guard is trivially true. More generally, a compilation pass may apply different transformations to similar pieces of code depending on some heuristic, and these heuristics should be irrelevant to the correctness argument. To overcome this issue we reuse the annotation facility to be able to statically determine how each source instruction is transformed. The compiler generates two programs: an annotated version of the source\(^5\) and its compiled version. The compiler adds a boolean flag to the source to tell whether a branch is eliminated or not. Therefore, trivial branches that only appear during the execution and are not visible to the compiler will not have this flag set and the num-steps function can predict that the corresponding execution step is preserved. The flag part of \(k_2\) is false indicating that the \(i\) is preserved; the annot-step function is the identity. The num-steps function is defined following the same idea of the previous example. As well, to prove that execution does not stutter for ever we use the size of the command. The \(\approx\) predicate ensures equality of environments and that the target code come from the compilation of the source taking into account the flags.

**Theorem 8.** \(\approx\) is general simulation invariant. \((\overline{\varepsilon}, \overline{\Xi})\) is a general CT-simulation relative to \(\approx\), num-steps and \(|·|\). Constant-propagation preserves the constant-time policy.

\[
\begin{align*}
    c_1 \sim c'_{1} & \quad c_{2} \sim c'_{2} \\
    \text{loop}^{b} & c_{1} \ b \ c_{2} \sim \text{loop} \ c'_{1} \ b \ c'_{2} \\
    c_{1} \sim c'_{1} & \quad c_{2} \sim c'_{2} \quad \text{loop}^{n} \ c_{1} \ c_{2} \sim c' \\
    \text{loop}^{n+1} & c_{1} \ b \ c_{2} \sim c'_{1} ; \text{if} \ b \ (c'_{2} ; c') \text{skip}
\end{align*}
\]

*Fig. 8: Specification of loop peeling*

3) **Loop peeling:** Loop peeling is an optimization that unrolls the first iterations of loops. It is a good example where annot-step is not the identity function but counts the number of loop iterations.

How many iterations are actually peeled may depend on heuristics which should not be visible in the correctness proof (nor in the simulation argument). In this case, instead of proving one particular compilation scheme, we define a relation between source and target commands that captures various possible ways to perform the transformation. This relation is written \(\sim\) and defined on Figure 8. Each source loop instruction is annotated with a number stating how many iterations of this loop are peeled. For these annotations to remain consistent during the execution, this counter is decremented on each iteration: formally, \(\text{annot-step}(n, a) = \max(0, n - 1, a)\).

For this transformation, the \(\approx\) predicate is equality of environments and \(\sim\) of commands. The num-steps function is equal to 1, except on loop with a non-zero annotation for which it is 0. The \(|·|\) function is the number of nested loop in the first instruction.

**Theorem 9.** \(\approx\) is simulation invariant. \((\overline{\varepsilon}, \overline{\Xi})\) is a CT-simulation relative to \(\approx\), num-steps and \(|·|\). Loop peeling preserves the constant-time policy.

4) **Linearization:** Linearization transforms programs into lists of instructions with explicit labels. The linear language features (only) two instructions: assignment “\(x = e\)’ of the value of an expression \(e\) to a l-value \(x\); and conditional branching “\(\text{jnz } b \ n\)” which continues execution at (relative) position \(n\) when expression \(b\) evaluates to a non-zero value or falls through the next instruction otherwise. When the condition is syntactically 1, we simply write “\(\text{goto } n\)”. In this language, a program is a list of instructions, and execution starts at position zero, i.e., at the beginning of said list. The execution state is a triple made of the program counter, the current environment, and the whole program.

In the language, the leakage of a step corresponds to the leakage of the expressions and the value of the next program point. This is analogous to leaking the boolean value of conditional jumps.

The transformation \([\cdot]\) from the structured language from previous sections to linear is described in Figure 9. It introduces forward jumps at the end of else branches (to bypass the corresponding then branches) and at the beginning of loops (to bypass the second body before the first iteration). These jumps do not correspond to any particular instruction in the source. To define the \(\approx\) relation for the correctness proof, we always allow the target execution to perform (any number of) such jumps. The technical difficulty of the proof comes from the fact that each source instruction will be in relation with many target instructions, some of them correspond to the compilation of the original instruction but some of them come from its context; breaking the locality of the proof.

Moreover, there may be a final sequence of jumps at the end of the target execution. This implies that the target execution may be delayed a little bit after the source execution finished. This is why we use the additional diagram for final states in the CT-simulation. Furthermore, since in the linear language

\[
\begin{align*}
    [x = e] &= x = e \\
    [\text{if } b \ c_1 \ c_2] &= \text{jnz } b \ n_2; [c_2]; \text{goto } n_1; [c_1] \\
    // & \text{where } n_2 = \|c_2\| + 2 \text{ and } n_1 = \|c_1\| + 1 \\
    [\text{loop } c_1 \ b \ c_2] &= \text{goto } n_2; [c_2]; [c_1]; \text{jnz } b \ n \\
    // & \text{where } n_2 = \|c_2\| + 1 \text{ and } n = -\|c_2\|; [c_1]
\end{align*}
\]

*Fig. 9: Linearization*
the full program is part of the running state and never changes, it is convenient to show this invariant once and for all. This is where the reachability hypotheses are useful.

To establish the CT-simulation, we introduce a relation \( L \) between states that claims that the program point is the same. The proof of the CT-diagram follows without surprises. The technicalities due to the change in representation (from a structured language to an unstructured one) are dealt with using the same lemmas as for the correctness proof.

The \( \text{num-steps} \) function is defined as the number of forward jump from the current target program counter, plus 1 if the current source instruction is not a loop. The \(|-|\) function is the number of nested loops in the first source instruction.

**Theorem 10.** The relation \( \approx \) is a simulation w.r.t. \( \text{num-steps} \). \((\equiv, L) \) is a CT-simulation relative to \( \approx \) w.r.t. \( \text{num-steps} \) and \(|-|\). Linearization preserves the constant-time policy.

5) Common branches factorization: In these last two sections, we consider a new kind of transformation where the order of evaluation of expressions/instructions is changed. The first transformation consists in factorizing the common prefix of conditional branches. In other terms, the transformation will replace a statement of the form \( e \ h_1 \) \( c_1 \) \( h_2 \) \( c_2 \) by \( h \); if \( e \ c_1 \ c_2 \), when the evaluation of \( e \) is not affected by the evaluation of \( h \). This allows to reduce the size of the code. To prove the correctness, we need to establish the general simulation for a given relation \( \approx \). When the if instruction on \( e \) is executed in the source program, the \( h \) instructions should be first executed in the target program before executing the conditional on \( e \). Similarly, when the \( h \) instructions are executed in the source program, they have been already executed in the target program, so nothing should be done. For the correctness of the compiler the difficulty is that the environments of the source program and of the target program are desynchronised at some point. For CT-simulation the difficulty is that the leaks of \( h \) will appear in the target trace before they appear in the source.

The notion of simulation used for this transformation \( a \approx \alpha \) is defined by:

\[
\exists h, a. \text{cmd} \ h \approx \alpha. \text{cmd} \land \{h, a. \text{env}\} \rightarrow^* \{\text{skip}, \alpha. \text{env}\}.
\]

The predicate \( e \ h \approx \alpha \) is presented Figure 10. Morally \( e \) is the code of the source program, \( \alpha \) of the target program, and \( h \) is the sequence of instructions which have been already executed in the target program but are still to be executed in the source. The notion of simulation requires that the evaluation of \( h \) in the source environment terminates on the target environment.

When \( h \approx \text{skip} \) we omit it.

If \( h \) is skip, the rules (omitted in the figure) say that the predicate \( \sim \) is structural. To simplify the proof, we assume that source program is annotated with numbers. For assignments and loops, the number indicates the value of the \( \text{num-steps} \) function needed by the simulation. For conditional, if the number is not 0, it corresponds to the number of instructions which have been factorized out by the compiler. The code of each branch should be related by \( \sim \), \( h \) should be terminating\(^6\) and should not modify the variables read by \( e \) (this ensures that the evaluation of \( e \) can swap with the evaluation of \( h \)).

If \( h \) is not skip, see the last rule, it means that the target program has already executed \( h \) and the source program should catch up with the target. This means that the source evaluation step corresponds to no execution step in the target program; this is why the annotation in the source is 0.

The \( \text{num-steps} \) function cannot be fully inferred statically (i.e., at compile time), because \( h \) may contain conditionals and so the number of steps to execute depends on the execution environment and of which branches are taken. It is not a problem with our proof technique since the \( \text{num-steps} \) function is parametrized by the source and the target states. The termination condition ensures that the evaluation of \( h \) will terminate in a finite number of steps\(^7\). The \(|-|\) function is the size of the source instruction.

**Theorem 11.** \( \approx \) is general simulation with w.r.t. \(|-|\) and \( \text{num-steps} \). \((\equiv, \sim) \) is a general CT-simulation relative to \( \approx \). Common branches factorization preserves the constant-time policy.

6) Switching instructions: Switching instructions of a program is a very common optimization. It can be used together with common branches to improve its efficiency, but its most common use is for instruction scheduling. It is a typical example of transformation that depends on heuristics (which can be different for each target architecture) which should not be visible in the correctness proof. To that end, we simply prove a checker taking a source program and a target program and returns true if they are equal up to a valid permutation inside basic blocks (list of assignments), but the control-flow is still the same. The notion of valid permutation should ensure that the semantic of the program is unchanged. For example, \( c_1; c_2 \) can be transformed into \( c_2; c_1 \) if variables read and written by \( c_2 \) are not written by \( c_1 \) (and vice versa), furthermore both instructions should terminate\(^8\). To be able to define the \( \approx \) relation we encounter the same difficulty as for common branches factorization: the source and target states are not

\[c_1 \sim h \ c'_1 \quad c_2 \sim h \ c'_2 \quad \text{terminating}(h)\]

\[\text{write}(h) \cap \text{read}(e) = \emptyset\]

\[\text{if } e \ c_1 \ c_2 \sim h; \text{if } e \ c_1' \ c_2' \sim h'\]

\[i^0 \ c \sim c'\]

---

\(^6\)Our formalization requires that \( h \) is a sequence of assignments and conditionals. It would be possible to support loops for which the compiler is able to prove termination.

\(^7\)Without that condition it is not clear that the correctness of the compiler can be expressed/proven using a small step simulation diagram.

\(^8\)Termination of \( c_1 \) is needed to ensure preservation of constant-time.
\[
\begin{align*}
\frac{c \; h_1 \; h_2 \; \sim \; c' \; \text{swap}(i, h_1)}{\text{num-steps} (i, h_1; h_2) \; \sim \; \text{num-steps} (i, h_1; h_2)}
\end{align*}
\]

Fig. 11: \(\approx\) predicate for switching instructions

synchronized. Figure 11 defines the \(\sim\) predicate used to define \(\approx\). As for common branches factorization it is parametrized by a code \(h\) representing instructions already executed in the target and that remain to be executed in the source. Intuitively, \(c \; h \; \sim \; c'\) should be interpreted has \(c\) is a valid permutation of \(h; c'\). Some rules (not shown) allow to perform transformation under context, the two presented rules define the permutation. The predicate \text{swap} ensures that the two instructions can be safely swapped without changing the semantic of the program. The \text{num-steps} function return directly the annotation of the current instruction, the \(|·|\) is the size of the instruction.

**Theorem 12.** \(\approx\) is a general simulation w.r.t. \text{num-steps} and \(|·|\). \((\equiv, \preceq)\) is a CT-simulation relative to \(\approx\). Switching instructions preserves the constant-time policy.

**VIII. Towards realistic compilers**

A natural target for future work is to apply our methods to existing verified compilers. Although our work is carried for a rather simple language, we are confident that our selection of optimizations covers the main difficulties that can appear when proving preservation of the constant-time policy for full-fledged compilers. We discuss the case of the Jasmin and CompCert compilers. The discussion is summarized in Table II and Table I.

**A. Jasmin**

Jasmin [4] is a framework for building high speed and high assurance cryptographic software, using state-of-the-art methods from software verification and certified compilation. In the intended workflow, applications developed within this framework are written in the Jasmin programming language, which features a carefully chosen combination of high-level features (structured control flow such as loops), low-level abstractions (generic pseudo-assembly) and platform-specific instructions. Programs in the Jasmin language thus retain the familiar flavour of source programs and do not require programmers to develop their applications in less familiar and more restrictive languages—e.g. languages that do not have full support for loops. Jasmin programs are compiled into \(x64\) assembly using the Jasmin compiler. The Jasmin compiler is proved correct relative to big-step semantics of source and assembly programs.

Preservation of the constant-time policy by compilation is discussed explicitly by Almeida et al. [4] who provide an informal argument for the Jasmin compiler. We believe that our method provides the means to make their proof formal. Concretely, Figure 12 displays the compilation chain for Jasmin programs. Table II gathers all compilation passes, indicating for each of them how they relate to optimizations studied in this paper. On this account, we are confident that most of the compilation passes from Jasmin could be proved to preserve constant-time. However, the big-step semantics currently used for Jasmin remains a technical hurdle towards this goal.

**B. CompCert**

CompCert [22] is a verified, moderately optimizing, compiler for C. From a high-level perspective, CompCert compiles C programs to RTL (Register Transfer Language) programs, where programs are represented by their control-flow graphs and are optimized using dataflow analyses, and then to assembly programs, modelled as lists of low-level instructions operating over machine registers and memory locations. However, CompCert actually uses a dozen intermediate languages, each of which is defined by a formal small-step semantics that model normal termination, divergence, abnormal termination and undefined behaviors (such as out-of-bounds array accesses).

CompCert comes with a semantics preservation theorem that is obtained from the correctness of each of the compiler passes. Table I summarizes the passes of the CompCert compiler, indicating for each of them how they relate to optimizations studied in this paper.

Known issues with preservation of the constant-time policy by CompCert include the conversion between integers and floating points, which may introduce conditional branches that are not explicit present in the source program [11], and the compilation of specific 64-bits operations on 32-bits platforms\(^9\).

**C. Other languages**

We believe that our methodology should also apply to higher-level languages like Java; nonetheless, compilation passes that are specific to these languages – implementation of high-level abstractions, specific optimizations – may require specific arguments, hence further investigation.

\[^9\text{Xavier Leroy, personal communication}\]
TABLE I: CompCert compilation passes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>name</th>
<th>comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SimplExpr</td>
<td>Fixes the evaluation order; before this pass, the semantics is non-deterministic; the notion of constant-time is not well defined for the source program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SimplLocals</td>
<td>This step removes leakage; it is similar to our “register allocation” with trivial cases only.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C#minor gen.</td>
<td>Similar to our “constant folding”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cminor gen.</td>
<td>Allocates local variables to the stack; similar to our “spilling” pass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td>Similar to our “constant folding”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTL gen.</td>
<td>Combines our “expression flattening” and “linearization” passes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailcall</td>
<td>This pass reorders the behavior of a return instruction before the behavior of a call instruction; it thus has a lot in common with our passes which reorder instructions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inlining</td>
<td>These four passes change the leakage in a deterministic fashion, as in our “spilling” pass; they may change the control-flow (call-stack, program counter) and the concrete memory addresses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renumber</td>
<td>Similar to our “spilling” pass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CleanupLabels</td>
<td>Part of our “linearization” pass covers this transformation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deadcode</td>
<td>Similar to our “linearization” pass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocation</td>
<td>Similar to our “linearization” pass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunneling</td>
<td>Similar to our “spilling” pass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linearize</td>
<td>Similar to our “linearization” pass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacking</td>
<td>Similar to our “spilling” pass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASM gen.</td>
<td>the leakage model may change, as in our “linearization” pass.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE II: Jasmin compilation passes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>name</th>
<th>comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inlining</td>
<td>Changes the control-flow (hence the leakage) in a deterministic fashion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unused functions</td>
<td>Preserves leakage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loop unrolling</td>
<td>Similar to our “loop peeling”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alloc inline assign</td>
<td>Preserves leakage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant propagation</td>
<td>Combines our “constant folding” and “dead branch elimination” passes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead code elimination</td>
<td>This pass removes some instructions; showing ct-preservation is a simple instance of the general CT-simulations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share stack var.</td>
<td>Preserves leakage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Array init.</td>
<td>This is a special case of “dead code elimination” above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reg. array expansion</td>
<td>Preserves leakage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowering</td>
<td>Similar to our “expression flattening”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reg. allocation</td>
<td>Preserves leakage (as there is no spilling).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stack allocation</td>
<td>Similar to our “spilling”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linearization</td>
<td>Similar to our “linearization”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASM generation</td>
<td>Preserves leakage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

D. Using a compiler preserving the constant-time policy

In order to get a target program that is proved to comply with the constant-time policy using a compiler that is proved to preserve this property, it is required to first prove that the source program is safe (i.e., free of undefined behaviours) and constant-time. Moreover, the precise definition of the constant-time policy, i.e., the leakage model, should be the same for both proofs: the proof that the source program is constant-time; and the proof that the compiler preserves the constant-time property.

In this respect, there is a tension between what to expose as libraries (which must be verified as part of the source program) and what to treat as programming language constructs (which must be correctly implemented during compilation). Providing many constant-time primitives makes it easier to write constant-time programs at the source-level but makes harder the tasks of implementing and verifying a compiler which provides constant-time implementation of these primitives.

For instance, should a 64-bit shift operator be a constant-time primitive? In such case, a source-level program could safely use it, even on sensitive inputs; but the implementation of the compiler should carefully enforce that property on all architectures—even on 32-bit architectures without such a primitive readily available—lest it should not be constant-time preserving. Otherwise, this operator could be declared as non-constant-time at the source level, shifting the burden towards the users of the source programming language.

Again, preserving the constant-time policy is not a property of a compiler alone: it also depends on the particular leakage models of the source and target languages and libraries.

IX. RELATED WORK

Secure compilation is an active area of research in programming languages and cryptography. For the sake of focus, we concentrate on work that specifically addresses cryptographic constant-time and exclude from our discussion of other broad areas of research, including observational non-interference for other leakage models, quantitative analysis of side-channels, new computation paradigms (that can potentially protect against side-channel attacks), such as ORAM or hardware-protected mechanisms.

Many recent works address the challenge of verifying constant-time implementations formally, using established methods such as type systems, abstract interpretation and deductive verification. These methods are applied to source programs [10], assembly programs [6], or intermediate representations (e.g. LLVM IR) [3], [30]. These works do not address the problem of policy-preserving compilation—see however the informal discussion in [3]. Independently, preservation of the constant-time policy by compilation is mentioned in [29], in the context of a translation from λlow* to C* preserves constant-time. Cauligi et al. [13] develop a domain specific language and a compiler that generates constant-time code, and use automated verification tools to check that the generated code is constant-time. Barthe et al. [7] develop a general method for result-preserving compilation, and use their method to improve the precision of a constant-time analysis at intermediate level. However, their work focuses on preserving the results of alias analyses and does not study preservation of the constant-time policy.

Other works have considered preservation of specific information flow policies by compilation. Barthe et al. [8] define an information flow type system for a concurrent programming language and prove that typable programs are compiled into non-interfering assembly programs, under reasonable assumptions on the scheduler. Laud [21] and Fournet and
These are broad notions that could potentially be instantiated of our methods to other security notions that can be expressed propagation and spilling) to 750-800 lines (code motion and overall development is over 8,000 lines of Coq code. The Coq and their instantiations using the proving correctness of the transformation.

Preservation of constant-time policy is sometimes simpler than software-based side-channel countermeasure against cache-traces (in other words, traces that are preserved by optimizing compilers. As we have shown in many examples of this paper, optimizations do not preserve leakage property. However, there is no general result about logical relations from which our results would follow. Moreover, there have been concerns about full abstraction as a foundation for secure compilation. In particular, Patrignani and Garg [27] explore preservation of hyperproperties as an alternative to secure compilation, that they call trace-preserving compilation, is overly strong for proving preservation of the constant-time property by optimizing compilers. As we have shown in many examples of this paper, optimizations do not preserve leakage traces (in other words, traces that are preserved by optimizing compilers are not detailed enough to model attackers that monitor side-channels).

X. Conclusion

We have developed a general method for proving preservation by compilation of cryptographic constant-time, a popular software-based side-channel countermeasure against cache-based timing attacks, and provided instantiations to representative compiler optimizations. In our experience, proving preservation of constant-time policy is sometimes simpler than proving correctness of the transformation.

Additionally, we have formalized both the general methods and their instantiations using the Coq proof assistant. The overall development is over 8,000 lines of Coq code. The proofs of optimizations range from 250-300 lines (constant propagation and spilling) to 750-800 lines (code motion and expression flattening).

Future work includes proving preservation of constant-time policy for more realistic compilers and broadening the scope of our methods to other security notions that can be expressed as observational non-interference policies.

Acknowledgments

This work is partially supported by ONR Grants N000141210914 and N000141512750 and by Google Chrome University.

References


