

New Conversation Hijacking Campaign Delivering IcedID

Written by [Joakim Kennedy](#) and [Ryan Robinson](#) - 28 March 2022



This post describes the technical analysis of a new campaign detected by Intezer’s research team, which initiates attacks with a phishing email that uses conversation hijacking to deliver IcedID.

The underground economy is constantly evolving with threat actors specializing in specific fields. One field that has bloomed in the last few years is initial access brokers. Initial access brokers specialize in gaining an initial beachhead access to organizations and once achieved, sell the access to other threat actors that monetize it further.

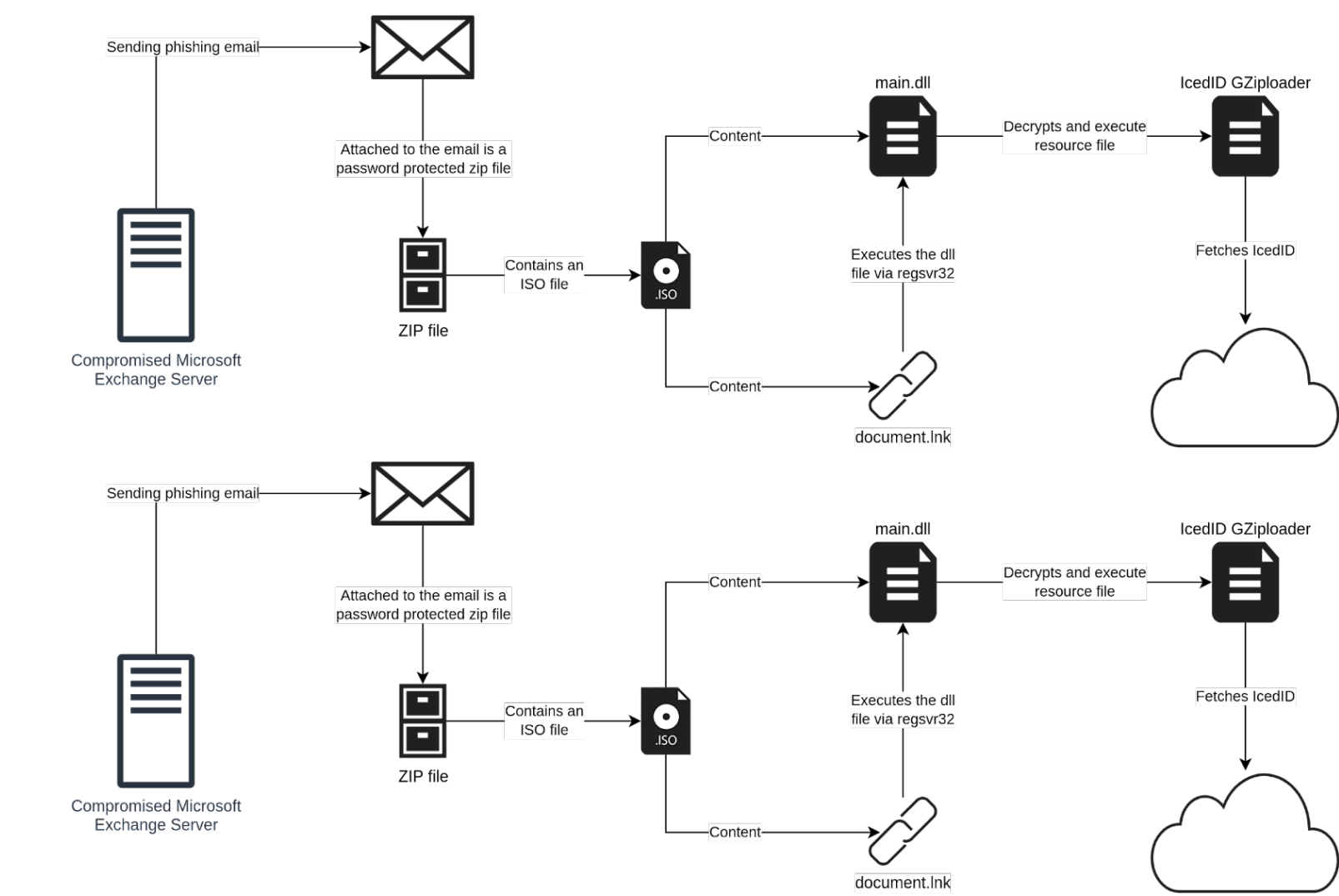
Some of the customers to initial access brokers buy the access to deploy ransomware. [Proofpoint](#) has identified ten access brokers that sell access to ransomware groups. These access brokers largely infect their victims with banking trojans that are later used to deploy another malware at the “purchaser’s request.”

One of these banking trojans that have been used to deploy [ransomware](#) is IcedID (BokBot). IcedID was first reported on by [IBM X-Force in November 2017](#) and the malware [shared some code with Pony](#). While initially designed to steal banking credentials, like many other banking trojans, the malware has been repurposed for deploying other malware on the infected machines.

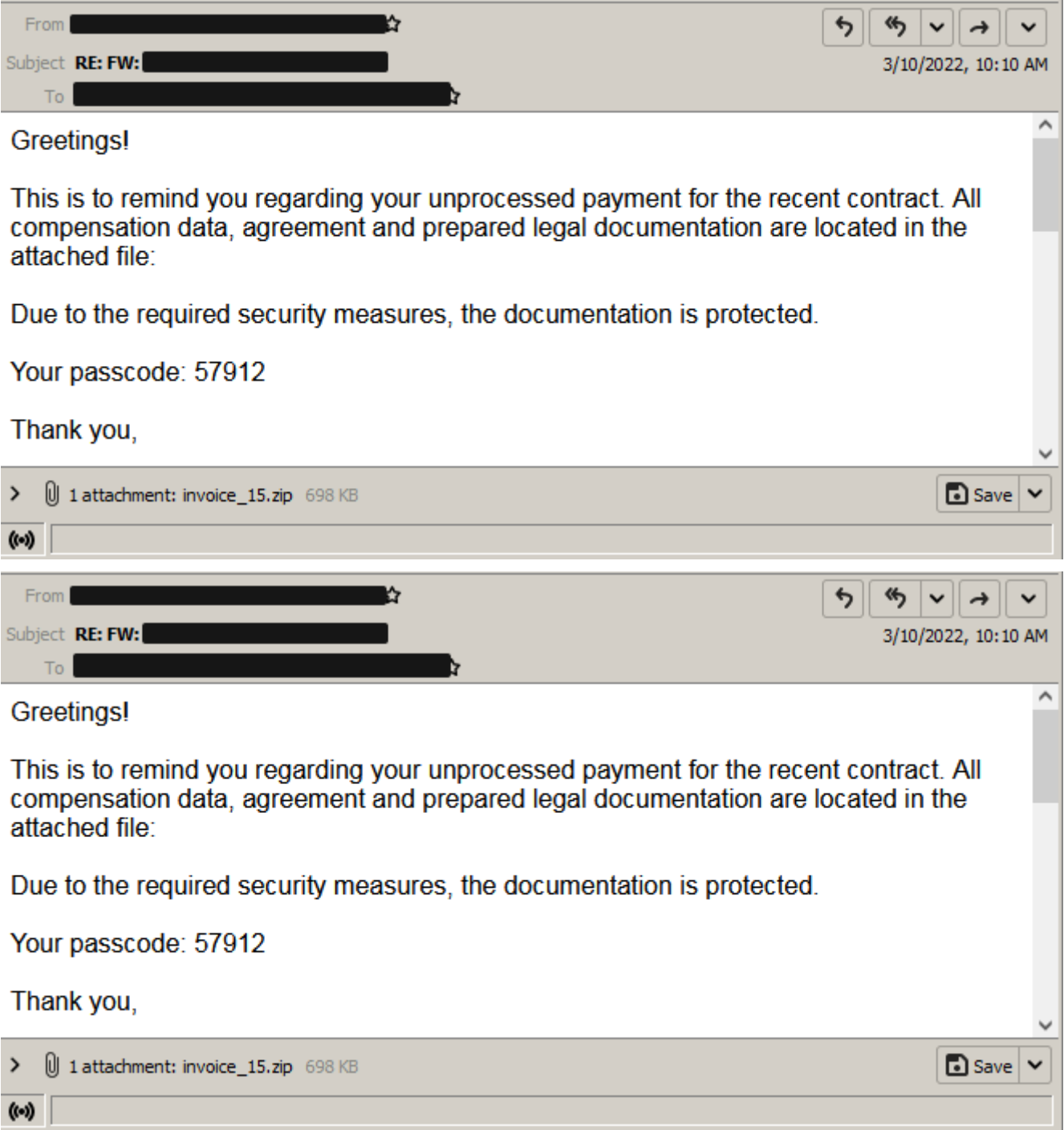
One way IcedID infects machines is via phishing [emails](#). The infection chain that commonly has been used is an email with an attached password protected “zip” archive. Inside the archive is a macro enabled office document that executes the IcedID installer. Some phishing emails reuse previously stolen emails to make the lure more convincing.

In the new IcedID campaign we have discovered a further evolution of the threat actors’ technique. The threat actor now uses compromised Microsoft Exchange servers to send the phishing emails from the account that they stole from. The payload has also moved away from using office documents to the use of ISO files with a Windows LNK file and a DLL file. The use of ISO files allows the threat actor to bypass the [Mark-of-the-Web](#) controls, resulting in execution of the malware without warning to the user. With regards to targeting, we have seen organizations within energy, healthcare, law, and pharmaceutical sectors.

Infection Chain



The attack-chain starts with a phishing email. The email includes a message about some important document and has a password protected “zip” archive file attached. The password to the archive is given in the email body, as can be seen in the screenshot below. What makes the phishing email more convincing is that it’s using conversation hijacking (thread hijacking). A forged reply to a previous stolen email is being used. Additionally, the email has also been sent from the email account from whom the email was stolen from.



The content of the zip archive is shown in the screenshot below. It includes a single “ISO” file with the same filename as the zip archive. It can also be seen that the file was created not that long before the email was sent.

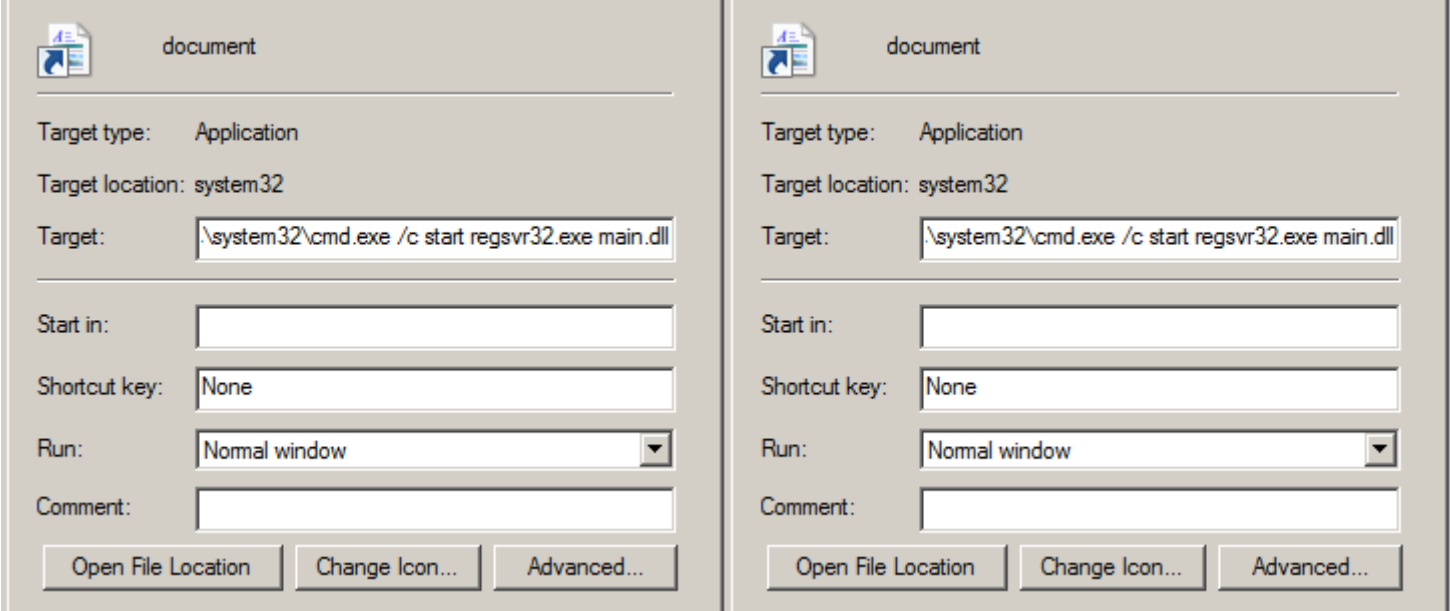
Name	Size	Packed Size	Modified	Created	Accessed
invoice_15.iso	1 271 808	714 748	2019-11-11 21:00	2022-03-10 09:24	2022-03-10 09:24

Name	Size	Packed Size	Modified	Created	Accessed
invoice_15.iso	1 271 808	714 748	2019-11-11 21:00	2022-03-10 09:24	2022-03-10 09:24


























The ISO file includes two files, a LNK file named “document” and a DLL file named “main.” From the timestamps it can be concluded that the DLL file was prepared the day before while the LNK file was prepared about a week before. It is possible that the LNK file has been used in earlier phishing emails.


























Name	Size	Packed Size	Modified	Name	Size	Packed Size	Modified
document.lnk	2 798	2 798	2022-03-03 18:35	document.lnk	2 798	2 798	2022-03-03 18:35
main.dll	1 204 736	1 204 736	2022-03-09 16:26	main.dll	1 204 736	1 204 736	2022-03-09 16:26

The LNK file has been made to look like a document file via its embedded icon file. As can be seen in the screenshot below, when a user double clicks the link file, it uses “regsvr32” to execute the DLL file.



The use of [regsvr32](#) allows for proxy execution of malicious code in main.dll for defense evasion. The DLL file is a loader for the IcedID payload. It contains a number of exports, most of which consist of junk code.

Name	Address	Ordinal
 DllGetClassObject	0000000180056770	1
 DllRegisterServer	00000001800568C0	2
 PluginInit	0000000180056CA0	3
 aoflzkfwvdmcyxdI	0000000180056FF0	4
 bttdeeedabgnsezg	0000000180056FB0	5
 cttsnnarqxwd	0000000180056FD0	6
 eygomnkcqpilfqsr	0000000180056F10	7
 hdeylqseigrra	0000000180056DF0	8
 hkjehmypbmo	0000000180056E10	9
 htallgyzd	0000000180056E90	10
 hwvcazraantyz	0000000180057030	11
 ifsunhfoggxojmvka	0000000180056F70	12
 ijwxmfjmec	0000000180056E70	13
 iokvvqtxkqgivps	0000000180057010	14
 joynovxqivdfapbc	0000000180056EF0	15
 kuwodho	0000000180056F50	16
 mhbhlfcqwlakbr	0000000180056A10	17
 mjbisvugvmsu	0000000180056F30	18
 nftsuscyjsxmN	0000000180056E30	19
 nmykguaw	0000000180056F90	20
 qjurwnmbegplN	0000000180056EB0	21
 rfhibhk	0000000180056ED0	22
 wniqeandiev	0000000180056B50	23
 wrzfrhgsqoidw	0000000180056E50	24
 DllEntryPoint	000000018006A444	[main entry]

Name	Address	Ordinal
 DllGetClassObject	0000000180056770	1
 DllRegisterServer	00000001800568C0	2
 PluginInit	0000000180056CA0	3
 aoflzkfwvdmcyxdI	0000000180056FF0	4
 bttdeeedabgnsezg	0000000180056FB0	5
 cttsnnarqxwd	0000000180056FD0	6
 eygomnkcqpilfqsr	0000000180056F10	7
 hdeylqseigrra	0000000180056DF0	8
 hkjehmypbmo	0000000180056E10	9
 htallgyzd	0000000180056E90	10
 hwvcazraantyz	0000000180057030	11
 ifsunhfoggxojmvka	0000000180056F70	12
 ijwxmfjmec	0000000180056E70	13
 iokvvqtxkqgivps	0000000180057010	14
 joynovxqivdfapbc	0000000180056EF0	15
 kuwodho	0000000180056F50	16
 mhbhlfcqwlakbr	0000000180056A10	17
 mjbisvugvmsu	0000000180056F30	18
 nftsuscyjsxmN	0000000180056E30	19
 nmykguaw	0000000180056F90	20
 qjurwnmbegplN	0000000180056EB0	21
 rfhibhk	0000000180056ED0	22
 wniqeandiev	0000000180056B50	23
 wrzfrhgsqoidw	0000000180056E50	24
 DllEntryPoint	000000018006A444	[main entry]

The loader will locate the encrypted payload, stored in the resource section of the binary. It does this through the technique API hashing. A decompilation of the simple hashing function is shown below.


```
uint32_t fcn.180059640(int64_t arg4, int64_t arg1)
{
    int32_t iVar1;
    char *pcStackX8;
    uint32_t uStack24;

    uStack24 = 0;
    pcStackX8 = (char *)arg4;
    do {
        iVar1 = fcn.180059630((uint64_t)uStack24);
        uStack24 = iVar1 + *pcStackX8;
        pcStackX8 = pcStackX8 + 1;
    } while (*pcStackX8 != '\0');
    return uStack24;
}
:>
```

```
uint32_t fcn.180059630(int64_t arg4)
{
    return (uint32_t)arg4 >> 0xd | (uint32_t)arg4 << 0x13;
}
:>
```

```
uint32_t fcn.180059640(int64_t arg4, int64_t arg1)
{
    int32_t iVar1;
    char *pcStackX8;
    uint32_t uStack24;

    uStack24 = 0;
    pcStackX8 = (char *)arg4;
    do {
        iVar1 = fcn.180059630((uint64_t)uStack24);
        uStack24 = iVar1 + *pcStackX8;
        pcStackX8 = pcStackX8 + 1;
    } while (*pcStackX8 != '\0');
    return uStack24;
}
:>
```

```
uint32_t fcn.180059630(int64_t arg4)
{
    return (uint32_t)arg4 >> 0xd | (uint32_t)arg4 << 0x13;
}
:>
```

The resulting hash is then compared with a hardcoded hash, locating the call for FindResourceA. The function is dynamically called to fetch the payload.

The first screenshot shows a debugger window with assembly code and memory dumps. The assembly code is as follows:

```

000007FEF1A673E5 48:83EC 68 sub rsp,68
000007FEF1A673E9 48:8B4424 70 mov rax,qword ptr ss:[rsp+70]
000007FEF1A673EE 48:894424 38 mov qword ptr ss:[rsp+38],rax
000007FEF1A673F3 BA 559AD03B mov edx,3B009A55
000007FEF1A673F8 B9 5BBC4A6A mov ecx,6A4ABC5B
000007FEF1A673FD E8 0E730000 call <main.get_proc_address_by_hash>
000007FEF1A67402 48:894424 40 mov qword ptr ss:[rsp+40],rax
000007FEF1A67407 41:B8 02000000 mov r8d,2
000007FEF1A6740D BA C9000000 mov ecx,C9
000007FEF1A67412 48:8B4C24 38 mov rcx,qword ptr ss:[rsp+38]
000007FEF1A67417 FF5424 40 call qword ptr ss:[rsp+40]
000007FEF1A6741B 48:894424 30 mov qword ptr ss:[rsp+30],rax
000007FEF1A67420 48:8B4424 30 mov rax,qword ptr ss:[rsp+30]
000007FEF1A67425 8B40 04 mov eax,dword ptr ds:[rax+4]
000007FEF1A67428 894424 20 mov dword ptr ss:[rsp+20],eax
000007FEF1A6742C 48:8B4424 30 mov rax,qword ptr ss:[rsp+30]

```

The memory dump shows the stack contents at address 000007FEF1A67417:

```

word ptr ss:[rsp+40]=[000000000010E0A0 <&FindResourceA>]=<kernel32.FindResourceA>
text:000007FEF1A67417 main.dll:$57417 #56817

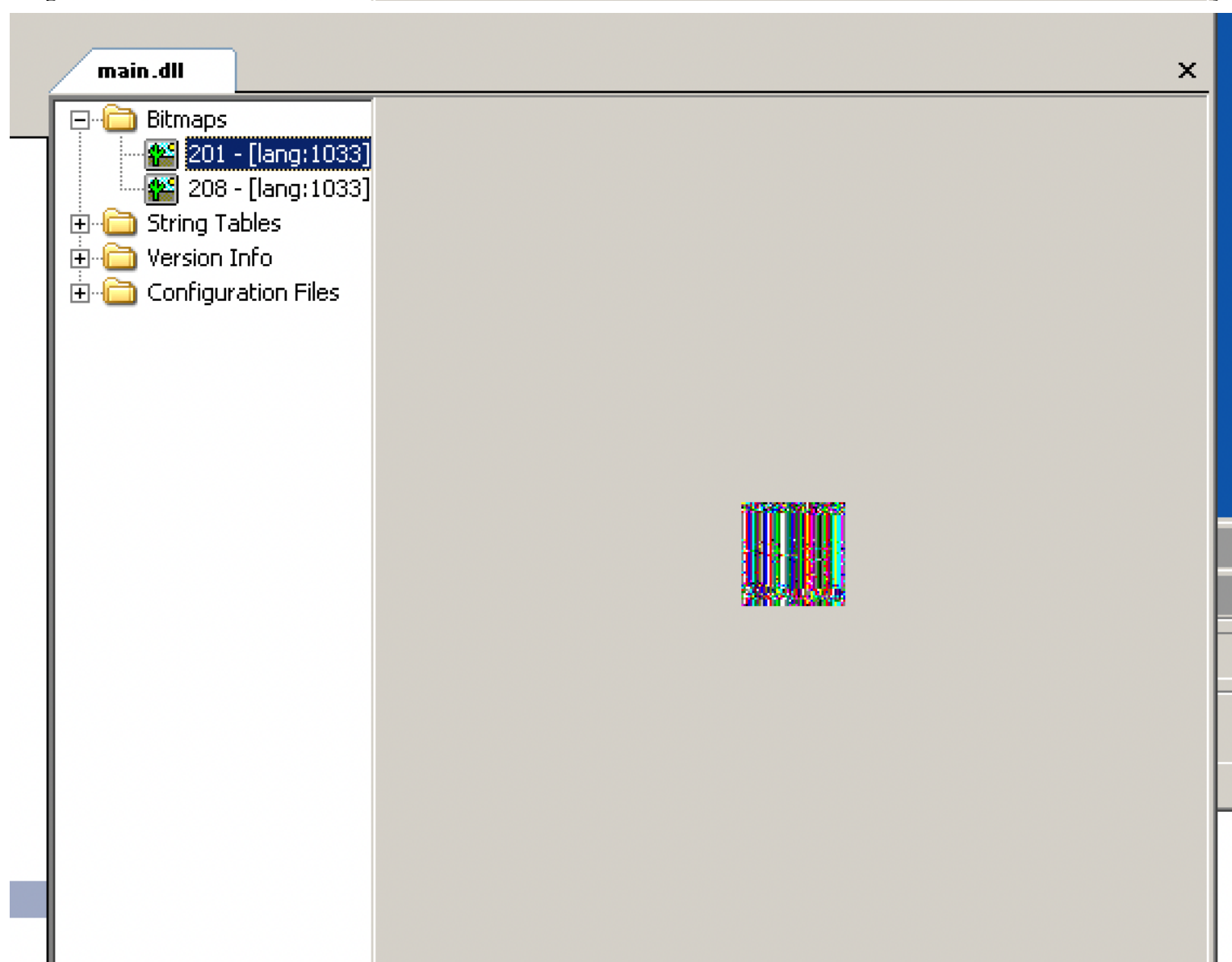
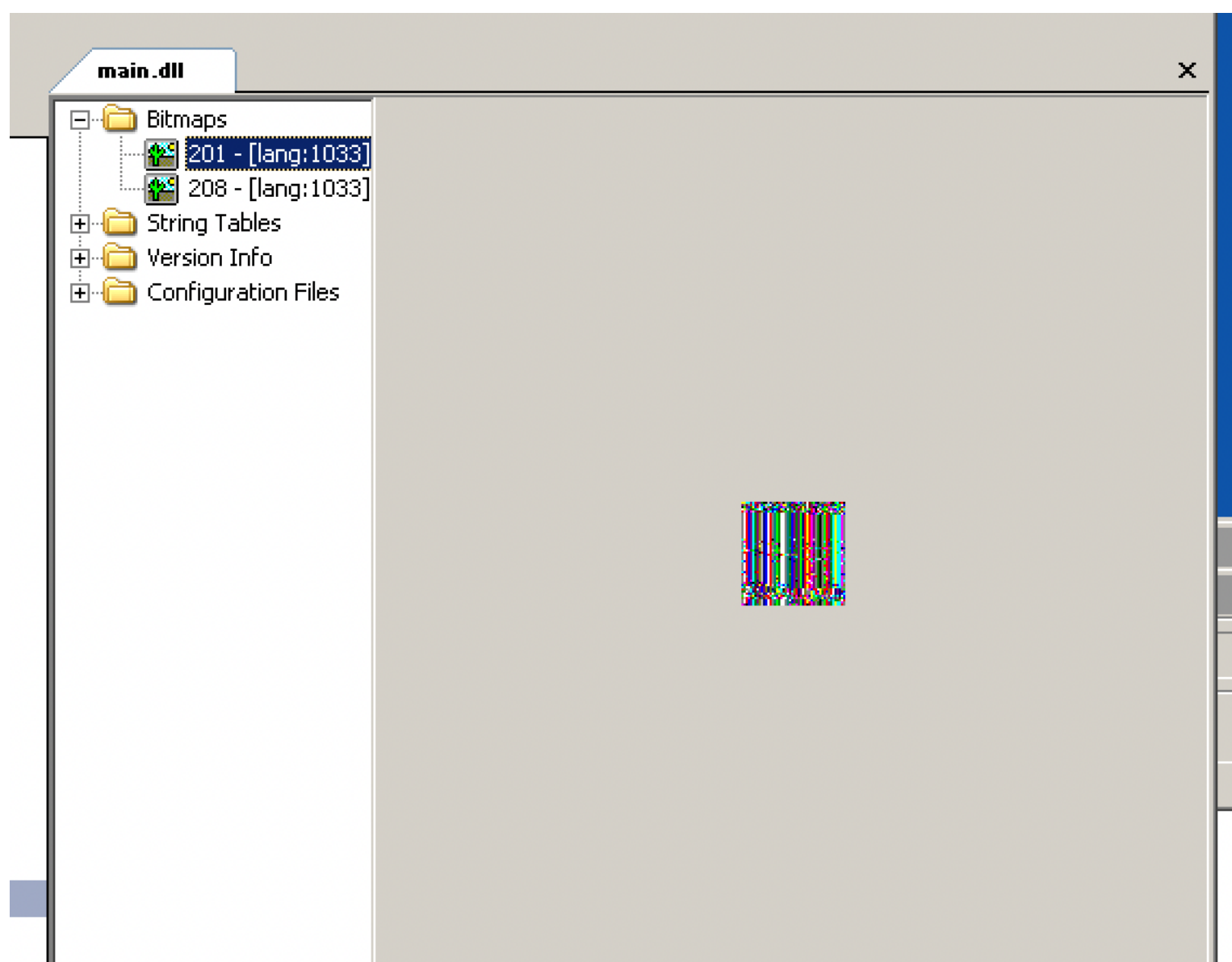
```

The second screenshot shows the same assembly code and memory dump, but with a different memory dump. The memory dump shows the stack contents at address 000007FEF1A67417:

```

word ptr ss:[rsp+40]=[000000000010E0A0 <&FindResourceA>]=<kernel32.FindResourceA>
text:000007FEF1A67417 main.dll:$57417 #56817

```



Memory is allocated using VirtualAlloc to hold the decrypted payload.

<pre> 000000000000E1151 000000000000E1156 000000000000E1158 000000000000E115A 000000000000E1162 000000000000E1167 000000000000E116D 000000000000E116F 000000000000E1175 000000000000E1179 000000000000E117F 000000000000E1183 000000000000E1188 000000000000E118E 000000000000E1190 000000000000E1195 000000000000E1198 000000000000E119F 000000000000E11A4 000000000000E11AA 000000000000E11AE 000000000000E11B1 000000000000E11B7 000000000000E11B8 000000000000E11BE 000000000000E11C4 000000000000E11C7 000000000000E11CE 000000000000E11D3 000000000000E11D8 000000000000E11E0 000000000000E11E4 000000000000E11E8 000000000000E11EC 000000000000E11EF 000000000000E11F1 000000000000E11F3 000000000000E11F4 000000000000E11F5 000000000000E11F6 </pre>	<pre> 70:004C24 70 85C0 74 15 66:0F6F05 DE7F0000 48:8D5424 30 F3:0F7F4424 30 EB 0A 66:C745 70 5C00 48:8D55 70 F1F5 C15F0000 48:8D53 0A 48:8D4C24 40 F1F5 B25F0000 33D2 48:8D4C24 40 F1F5 B55F0000 48:8D53 2A 48:8D4C24 40 F1F5 965F0000 48:8D53 0A 48:8BCE F1F5 915F0000 48:8D53 2A 48:8BCE F1F5 7C5F0000 4D:8BC7 48:8D93 C6020000 48:8D4C24 40 E8 20000000 4C:8D9C24 50010000 49:8B5B 28 49:8B73 30 49:8B7B 38 49:8BE3 41:5F 41:5E 5D C3 CC CC </pre>	<pre> lea rcx,qword ptr ss:[rsp+30] test eax,eax je 1E116F movdqa xmm0,xmmword ptr ds:[1E9140] lea rcx,qword ptr ss:[rsp+30] movdqu xmmword ptr ss:[rsp+30],xmm0 jmp 1E1179 mov word ptr ss:[rbp+70],5C lea rcx,qword ptr ss:[rbp+70] call qword ptr ds:[&1strcatA] lea rcx,qword ptr ds:[rbx+A] lea rcx,qword ptr ss:[rsp+40] call qword ptr ds:[&1strcatA] xor edx,edx lea rcx,qword ptr ss:[rsp+40] call qword ptr ds:[&CreateDirectoryA] lea rcx,qword ptr ds:[rbx+2A] lea rcx,qword ptr ss:[rsp+40] call qword ptr ds:[&1strcatA] lea rcx,qword ptr ds:[rbx+A] mov rcx,rsi call qword ptr ds:[&1strcpy] lea rcx,qword ptr ds:[rbx+2A] mov rcx,rsi call qword ptr ds:[&1strcatA] mov r8,r15 lea rcx,qword ptr ds:[rbx+2C6] lea rcx,qword ptr ss:[rsp+40] call <write_to_file> lea r11,qword ptr ss:[rsp+150] mov rbx,qword ptr ds:[r11+28] mov rsi,qword ptr ds:[r11+30] mov rdi,qword ptr ds:[r11+38] mov rsp,r11 pop r15 pop r14 pop rbp ret int3 int3 </pre>	<pre> 000000000000E9140:"c:\\ProgramData\\" </pre>
--	--	---	--

Conversation Hijacking as a Phishing Technique

The technique of hijacking an already existing conversation over email to spread malware is something threat actors have been using for a while. Normally email messages are stolen during an infection and used in future attacks to make the phishing email appear more legitimate. In the last six months, threat actors have evolved the technique further to make it even more convincing. Instead of sending the stolen conversation to the victim with a “spoofed” email address, threat actors are now using the email address of the victim that they stole the original email from to make the phishing email even more convincing.

[Kevin Beaumont](#) reported on this conversation hijacking technique back in November 2021 being used to distribute Qakbot. Through the investigation, he confirmed that the Microsoft Exchange servers where the emails originated from had evidence of being exploited by ProxyShell.

New Campaign Discovered in March 2022

In the current mid-March campaign, we have discovered reuse of the same stolen conversation now being sent from the email address that received the latest email. Back in January when this conversation was also used, the “FROM” address was “webmaster@[REDACTED].com” with the name of the recipient of the last email in the conversation. By using this approach, the email appears more legitimate and is transported through the normal channels which can also include security products.

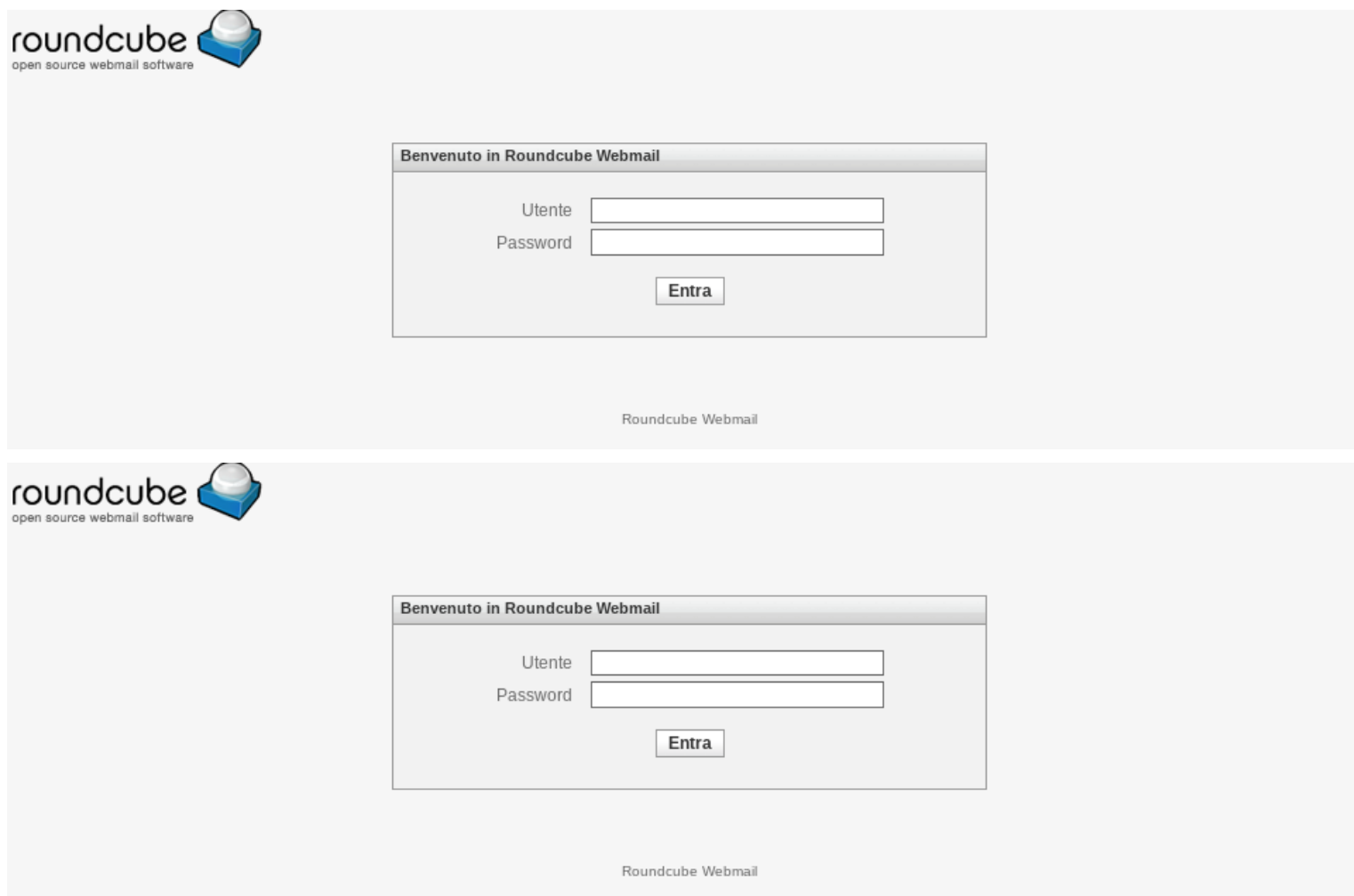
The majority of the originating Exchange servers we have observed appear to also be unpatched and publicly exposed, making the ProxyShell vector a good theory. While the majority of the Exchange servers used to send the phishing emails can be accessed by anyone over the Internet, we have also seen a phishing email sent internally on what appears to be an “internal” Exchange server.

The code snippet below shows a small part of the email header. The IP address of the Exchange server is a local IP address (172.29.0.12) with a top-level domain name of “local”. We can also see a header added by Exchange marking it as an internal email. The exchange server also has added a header of the original client (172.29.5.131 which also is a local IP address) that connected to the Exchange server over [MAPI](#).

Received: from ExchSrv01.[REDACTED].local (172.29.0.12) by ExchSrv01.[REDACTED].local (172.29.0.12) with Microsoft SMTP Server (version=TLS1_2, cipher=TLS_ECDHE_RSA_WITH_AES_256_GCM_SHA384) id 15.2.464.5 via

Mailbox Transport; Thu, 10 Mar 2022 14:34:29 +0100 Received: from ExchSrv01.[REDACTED].local (172.29.0.12) by ExchSrv01.[REDACTED].local (172.29.0.12) with Microsoft SMTP Server (version=TLS1_2, cipher=TLS_ECDHE_RSA_WITH_AES_256_GCM_SHA384) id 15.2.464.5; Thu, 10 Mar 2022 14:34:29 +0100 Received: from ExchSrv01.[REDACTED].local ([fe80::b148:8e7:61f8:61b4]) by ExchSrv01.[REDACTED].local ([fe80::b148:8e7:61f8:61b4%6]) with mapi id 15.02.0464.005; Thu, 10 Mar 2022 14:34:29 +0100 ... X-MS-Exchange-Organization-AuthAs: Internal X-MS-Exchange-Organization-AuthMechanism: 04 X-MS-Exchange-Organization-AuthSource: ExchSrv01.[REDACTED].local X-MS-Has-Attach: yes X-MS-Exchange-Organization-SCL: -1 X-MS-Exchange-Organization-RecordReviewCfmType: 0 x-ms-exchange-organization-originalclientipaddress: 172.29.5.131 x-ms-exchange-organization-originalserveripaddress: fe80::b148:8e7:61f8:61b4%6

We didn't manage to find a corresponding public IP address for this Exchange server and it is not known to us how it was accessed by the threat actor. The only thing we managed to find was a [roundcube](#) webmail instance. The login page is shown in the screenshot below.



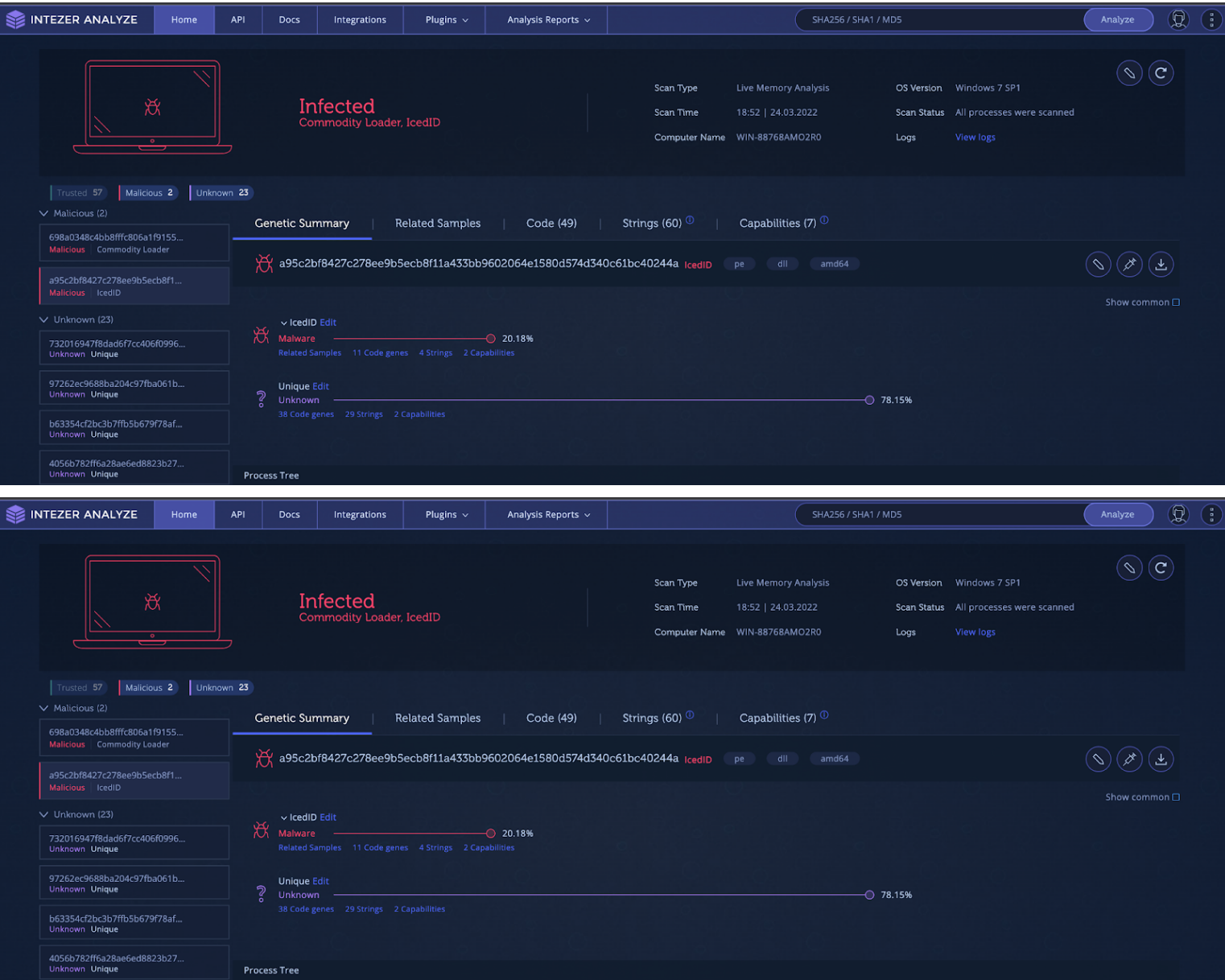
One of the headers in the snippet above reported that the client connected to the server via MAPI. [MAPI](#) is a protocol used (for example, by Outlook) to access the mailbox on an Exchange server. This suggests that the threat actor used an Exchange client instead of using SMTP to send the email. We have also seen the header “X-Mailer: Microsoft Outlook 16.0” in multiple phishing emails. In other phishing emails a “X-Originating-IP” header can be found. This is a header added by the Exchange server when the web interface is used. The IP address in the header is that of the client that connected to the server. We have observed both hosting providers and non-commercial IP addresses for the client IP.

Attribution

In June 2021, Proofpoint released a [report](#) on different access brokers that facilitates access for ransomware groups. Of the different threat actors, according to Proofpoint, two of them (TA577 and TA551) used IcedID as their malware. The techniques used by TA551 include [conversation hijacking](#) and [password protected zip](#) files. The group is also [known](#) to use regsvr32.exe for signed binary proxy execution for malicious DLLs.

Summary

The use of conversation hijacking is a powerful social engineering technique that can increase the rate of a successful phishing attempt. The payload has been moved away from office documents to the use of ISO files, employing the use of commodity packers and multiple stages to hide activity. It is important to be able to detect malicious files in memory to detect this type of attack. We recommend you use an [endpoint scanner](#).



IoCs

ISO File: 3542d5179100a7644e0a747139d775dbc8d914245292209bc9038ad2413b3213 Loader DLL:
698a0348c4bb8fffc806a1f915592b20193229568647807e88a39d2ab81cb4c2 LNK File:
a17e32b43f96c8db69c979865a8732f3784c7c42714197091866473bcfac8250 IcedID GZiploader Network:



yourgroceries[.]top Joakim Kennedy

Dr. Joakim Kennedy is a Security Researcher analyzing malware and tracking threat actors on a daily basis. For the last few years, Joakim has been researching malware written in Go. To make the analysis easier he has written the Go Reverse Engineering Toolkit (github.com/goretk), an open-source toolkit for analysis of Go binaries.



Ryan Robinson

Ryan is a security researcher analyzing malware and scripts. Formerly, he was a researcher on Anomali's Threat Research Team.

[conversation hijacking](#) [DLL file](#) [icedID](#) [IoCs](#) [LNK file](#) [Microsoft Exchange Server](#) [Phishing](#) [ransomware](#)