Zero-Knowledge eKYC in Decentralized Systems: ZK-Proofs and ZK-SNARKs Circuits with Circom ZK and Iden3 Protocol

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Abstract - The proliferation of digital documents and rising privacy concerns have created an urgent need for secure, confidential verification systems. This paper presents a novel approach to document verification in decentralized systems using zero-knowledge proofs (ZKPs) and zero-knowledge succinct non-interactive arguments of knowledge (ZK-SNARKs). We propose a framework that leverages the Circom ZK circuit design language and the Iden3 protocol to create a privacy-preserving document verification system. Our research explores ZK-proofs and blockchain technology, demonstrating how these cryptographic techniques can verify document integrity and authenticity without revealing sensitive information. We present a detailed analysis of Circom ZK, showcasing its efficacy in creating complex arithmetic circuits for document-related proofs. The integration of the Iden3 protocol addresses the challenges of identity management in decentralized environments. We outline the design and implementation of ZK-SNARK circuits using Circom, each tailored to specific document verification scenarios. Performance and security evaluations indicate significant improvements in privacy preservation and a reduction in on-chain data requirements, albeit with a moderate increase in computational overhead. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on privacy-enhancing technologies in blockchain systems and offers a practical solution for implementing secure, privacy-preserving document verification in decentralized environments.

Keywords: Zero-Knowledge Proofs, ZK-SNARKs, Circom ZK, Iden3, Blockchain, Document Verification, Privacy-Preserving Technology, Decentralized Systems

I. INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, the proliferation of electronic documents has revolutionized information exchange and storage. However, this shift has also brought significant challenges in document verification, particularly concerning privacy and security. As organizations and individuals increasingly rely on digital documents for critical transactions, the need for robust, privacy-preserving verification systems has become paramount [1].

Traditional document verification methods often involve sharing sensitive information, exposing individuals and organizations to potential privacy breaches and data misuse. This vulnerability is especially concerning in decentralized systems, where trust is distributed and conventional centralized verification mechanisms are inadequate [2]. The advent of blockchain technology has offered new possibilities for secure and transparent record-keeping, yet it also presents unique challenges in balancing transparency with privacy [3].

Zero-knowledge proofs (ZKPs), a cryptographic technique introduced by Goldwasser, Micali, and Rackoff [4], provide a promising solution to this dilemma. ZKPs allow one party (the prover) to prove to another party (the verifier) that a statement is true without revealing any information beyond the validity of the statement itself. This property makes ZKPs particularly suitable for document verification scenarios where privacy is crucial.

Building upon ZKPs, zero-knowledge succinct non-interactive arguments of knowledge (ZK-SNARKs) offer a more efficient and practical implementation for complex proofs [5]. ZK-SNARKs allow for constant-size proofs and rapid verification, making them ideal for blockchain-based applications where computational resources and storage are at a premium [6].

This paper presents a novel framework for document verification in decentralized systems using ZK-SNARKs. Our approach leverages the Circom ZK circuit design language [7] and the Iden3 protocol [8] to create a privacy-preserving document verification system. The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To design and implement ZK-SNARK circuits using Circom for various document verification scenarios.
2. To integrate the Iden3 protocol for robust identity management in a decentralized context.
3. To evaluate the performance and security implications of our proposed system.
4. To address scalability challenges inherent in ZKP systems and propose optimizations.

Our work builds upon recent advancements in ZKP technology, such as the Pinocchio protocol [9], which demonstrated the feasibility of nearly practical verifiable computation. We extend these concepts to the specific domain of document verification, addressing unique challenges in this context.

Through this research, we aim to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on privacy-enhancing technologies in blockchain systems [10] and offer a practical solution for implementing secure, privacy-preserving document verification in decentralized environments.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Evolution of Document Verification Systems

The history of document verification is as old as written communication itself. In ancient civilizations, clay seals and signet rings were used to authenticate documents, with the Sumerians employing cylinder seals as early as 3500 BCE [11]. These methods evolved over time, with medieval Europe introducing wax seals bearing unique insignias to verify the authenticity and source of important documents [12].

The industrial revolution brought more sophisticated security features. Watermarks, first used in 13th century Italy, became a standard for important documents and currency [13]. The 19th and 20th centuries saw the introduction of special papers with distinct textures, colors, or embedded fibers, and later, holograms in the 1980s [14].

However, as Müller et al. (2019) point out, these physical methods are increasingly inadequate in the digital age, being prone to forgery and human error [15]. The transition to digital methods began with the invention of digital signatures in the 1970s, which use public key cryptography to verify document authenticity and integrity [16]. This was followed by the development of Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) systems in the 1990s, providing a framework for creating, managing, and validating digital certificates [17].

The 21st century has seen the integration of biometric verification, adding an additional layer of security by incorporating unique physical characteristics into the verification process [18]. More recently, blockchain technology has emerged as a promising solution for creating immutable and transparent records of document histories [19].

B. Blockchain Technology and Document Verification

Blockchain technology, first introduced by Satoshi Nakamoto in 2008 [20], has emerged as a revolutionary approach to secure and transparent record-keeping. Its decentralized and immutable nature makes it particularly suitable for document verification purposes.

The core features of blockchain that make it attractive for document verification include:

1. Immutability: Once data is recorded on a blockchain, it becomes extremely difficult to alter without detection [21].
2. Decentralization: The distributed nature of blockchain eliminates the need for a central authority, reducing single points of failure [22].
3. Transparency: All transactions on a public blockchain are visible to all participants, enhancing trust and auditability [23].

Several researchers have explored the application of blockchain in document verification. Xu et al. (2020) demonstrated a blockchain-based system for academic credential verification, highlighting improved transparency and reduced fraud [24]. Their system allows educational institutions to issue digital certificates on a blockchain, which can be easily verified by potential employers or other institutions.

Similarly, Gipp et al. (2017) proposed a blockchain-based approach for trusted timestamping of scientific publications [25]. This system provides an immutable record of when a particular scientific work was published, helping to establish priority in research and combat plagiarism.

In the realm of legal documents, Lemieux (2016) explored the use of blockchain for maintaining the integrity of digital records [26]. Her work suggests that blockchain could provide a robust solution for long-term preservation and verification of legal documents.

However, blockchain-based solutions are not without limitations. Scalability remains a significant challenge, particularly for public blockchains. As noted by Scherer (2017), the increasing size of the blockchain and the computational resources required for consensus mechanisms pose obstacles to widespread adoption [27].

Additionally, the transparency of blockchain transactions can conflict with privacy requirements in many document verification scenarios. This issue has led to increased interest in privacy-preserving blockchain solutions, including the use of zero-knowledge proofs, as discussed by Kosba et al. (2016) in their work on Hawk, a blockchain model of cryptography and privacy-preserving smart contracts [28].

III. ZERO-KNOWLEDGE PROOFS: PRINCIPLES AND APPLICATIONS

Zero-knowledge proofs (ZKPs), introduced by Goldwasser, Micali, and Rackoff in their seminal 1989 paper [4], represent a significant advancement in cryptography. ZKPs allow one party (the prover) to prove to another party (the verifier) that a statement is true, without revealing any information beyond the validity of the statement itself.

The key properties of zero-knowledge proofs are:

1. Completeness: If the statement is true, an honest verifier will be convinced by an honest prover.
2. Soundness: If the statement is false, no cheating prover can convince an honest verifier that it is true, except with some small probability.
3. Zero-knowledge: If the statement is true, the verifier learns nothing other than the fact that the statement is true.

These properties make ZKPs particularly valuable in privacy-sensitive scenarios, including document verification. For instance, ZKPs can be used to prove the authenticity of a document without revealing its contents, or to verify a person's age without disclosing their exact birthdate.

ZKPs have found applications in various domains beyond document verification. Franck and Grote (2021) explored the use of ZKPs in privacy-preserving smart contracts [29]. Their work demonstrates how ZKPs can enable complex contract conditions to be verified without revealing the underlying data, enhancing privacy in blockchain transactions.

In the realm of identity management, Koens and Meijer (2018) investigated the potential of ZKPs in blockchain-based systems [30]. They proposed a model where individuals can prove certain attributes of their identity (e.g., being over 18) without revealing unnecessary personal information.

Narula et al. (2018) demonstrated the use of ZKPs in zkLedger, a system for auditing private financial transactions [31]. Their work shows how ZKPs can enable regulatory compliance in financial systems while preserving the privacy of individual transactions.

Despite their powerful properties, ZKPs face challenges in practical implementation. The computational complexity of generating and verifying proofs can be significant, especially for complex statements. This has led to ongoing research into more efficient ZKP systems, such as zk-SNARKs and STARKs, which we will explore in subsequent sections.

IV. ZK-SNARKS IN BLOCKCHAIN APPLICATIONS

Zero-Knowledge Succinct Non-Interactive Arguments of Knowledge (ZK-SNARKs) represent a significant advancement in ZKP technology. Introduced by Ben-Sasson et al. in 2014 [32], ZK-SNARKs offer three key improvements over traditional ZKPs:

1. Succinctness: The proofs are small in size, typically just a few hundred bytes, regardless of the complexity of the statement being proved.
2. Non-interactivity: The proof can be verified without further interaction with the prover.
3. Efficiency: Verification is computationally inexpensive, making ZK-SNARKs suitable for on-chain verification in blockchain systems.

These properties make ZK-SNARKs particularly attractive for blockchain applications, where computational resources are at a premium and non-interactivity is crucial for asynchronous verification.

One of the most notable applications of ZK-SNARKs is in privacy-preserving cryptocurrencies. Sasson et al. (2014) demonstrated their use in Zerocash [33], a protocol that became the basis for the privacy-focused cryptocurrency Zcash. In Zcash, ZK-SNARKs allow transactions to be fully encrypted on the blockchain while still guaranteeing their validity.

Beyond cryptocurrencies, ZK-SNARKs have found applications in various blockchain-based systems. Kosba et al. (2016) proposed Hawk [28], a framework for building privacy-preserving smart contracts using ZK-SNARKs. Their work shows how complex contractual agreements can be enforced on a blockchain without revealing the inputs or the internal state of the contract.

In the context of document verification, ZK-SNARKs offer powerful capabilities. They can be used to prove properties of a document (e.g., that it was signed by a particular authority) without revealing the document itself or any other sensitive information.

However, ZK-SNARKs are not without challenges. The initial setup phase requires a trusted setup, which has been a point of criticism due to the potential for backdoors if the setup is compromised. This has led to research into multi-party computation techniques for the trusted setup, as well as the development of ZKP systems that don't require a trusted setup, such as STARKs.

Recent research, such as the work on PLONK by Gabizon et al. (2019) [34], has focused on creating universal and updateable trusted setups. These advancements aim to mitigate the trusted setup concerns while maintaining the efficiency benefits of ZK-SNARKs.

V. CIRCOM ZK AND CIRCUIT DESIGN

Circom, introduced by Iden3 in 2018 [7], has emerged as a powerful tool for designing arithmetic circuits for zero-knowledge proofs. It provides a domain-specific language that allows developers to create complex ZK circuits more easily than traditional methods.

The key features of Circom include:

1. High-level abstractions: Circom allows developers to define circuits using high-level constructs, making the process more intuitive.
2. Modularity: Circuits can be composed from smaller, reusable components, enhancing code reuse and maintainability.
3. Automatic constraint generation: Circom automatically generates the arithmetic constraints required for the ZK proof system.

Recent work has demonstrated Circom's versatility in various applications. Kang et al. (2022) utilized Circom to create efficient circuits for privacy-preserving smart contract interactions [35]. Their work shows how Circom can be used to implement complex business logic in a privacy-preserving manner on blockchain platforms.

Scherer et al. (2021) explored the use of Circom in creating verifiable delay functions (VDFs) [36]. VDFs are cryptographic primitives that require a specified amount of sequential computation to evaluate but can be quickly verified. The authors' work demonstrates how Circom can be applied to cutting-edge cryptographic constructions.

In the context of document verification, Circom offers powerful capabilities for creating circuits that can prove properties of documents without revealing the documents themselves. For example, a Circom circuit could be designed to prove that a document contains a specific signature or that it was issued after a certain date, without revealing any other information about the document.

Despite its benefits, working with Circom and ZK circuits in general presents several challenges:

1. Circuit optimization: The efficiency of the resulting ZK proof is highly dependent on the design of the circuit. Optimizing circuits for minimal constraints is a non-trivial task.
2. Scalability: As circuits become more complex, the time and computational resources required for proof generation can increase significantly.
3. Composability: While Circom supports modular design, composing large systems from smaller circuits while maintaining efficiency can be challenging.

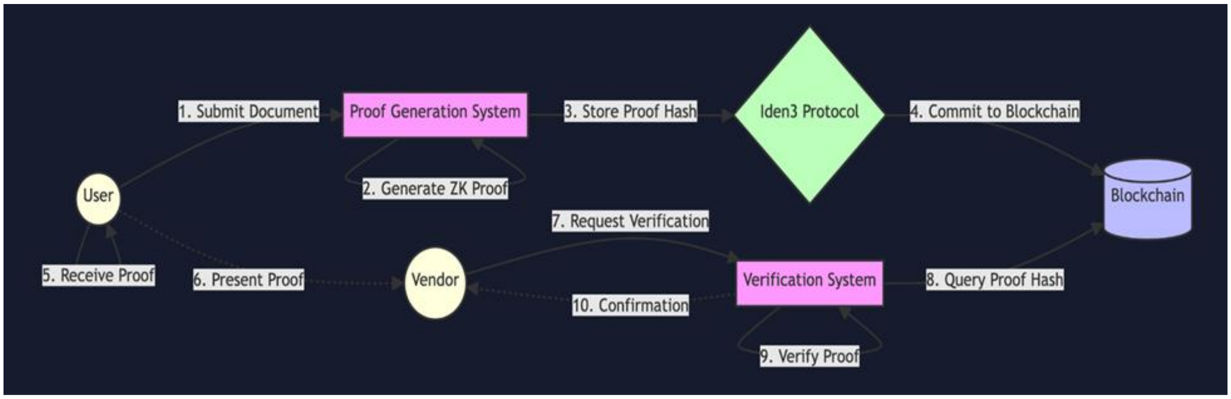
VI. IDEN3 PROTOCOL AND DECENTRALIZED IDENTITY

The Iden3 protocol, introduced in 2018 [8], proposes a scalable approach to decentralized identity management. It aligns with broader trends in self-sovereign identity, as discussed by Allen (2016) [37], where individuals have control over their digital identities.

Key features of the Iden3 protocol include:

1. ZK-SNARK-based identity verification: Iden3 uses ZK-SNARKs to enable privacy-preserving identity verification.
2. Hierarchical deterministic identities: Allows for the creation of an unlimited number of identities from a single master key.
3. Claim-based system: A flexible system for making claims about identities and having those claims attested by trusted parties.

Iden3's approach combines ZK-SNARKs with Merkle trees to create an efficient and privacy-preserving identity system. This system allows for selective disclosure of identity attributes, a crucial feature for many document verification scenarios. For example, a user could prove they are over 18 without revealing their exact age, or prove they have a valid driver's license without revealing any other information on the license.



VII. ZERO-KNOWLEDGE DOCUMENT VERIFICATION

The zero-knowledge document verification system using Circom and Iden3 protocol allows for secure and privacy-preserving verification of document ownership and integrity on a blockchain. Here's a breakdown of the process:

1. Document Hashing: The document is first hashed using the Poseidon hash function, which is efficient for zero-knowledge proofs. This creates a unique identifier for the document without revealing its contents.

2. Nullifier Generation: A nullifier is created by hashing the document owner's identity with the document hash. This prevents double-spending or multiple verifications of the same document by the same owner.
3. Merkle Tree Inclusion: The document hash is included in a Merkle tree, which efficiently represents a large set of data. The Merkle root is typically stored on the blockchain.
4. ZK-SNARK Generation: Using the Circom circuit, a zero-knowledge proof is generated. This proof demonstrates that:
    - The prover knows a document that hashes to the claimed value.
    - The document hash is included in the Merkle tree with the given root.
    - The nullifier is correctly computed from the document hash and owner's identity.
5. On-chain Verification: The ZK-SNARK proof is verified on the blockchain without revealing any information about the document or its owner.

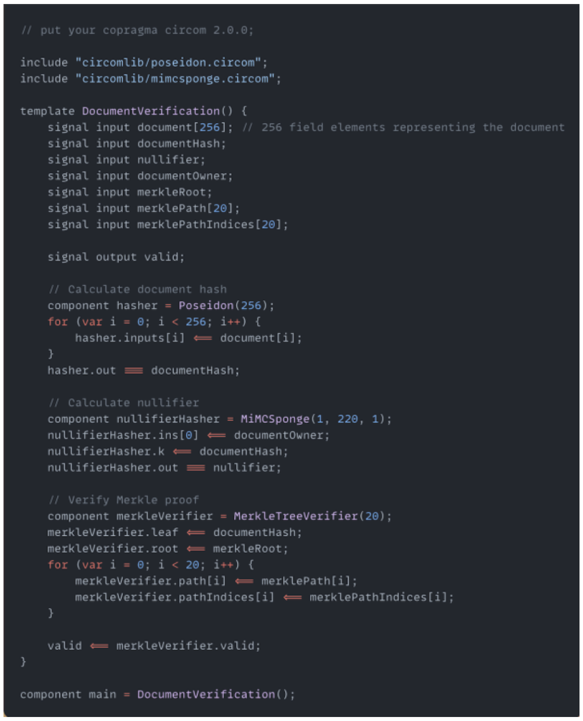
Potential Improvements:

1. Batching: Implement batch verification of multiple documents to reduce gas costs on the blockchain.
2. Updatable Proofs: Allow for efficient updates to the document without regenerating the entire proof.
3. Selective Disclosure: Extend the circuit to allow proving specific properties of the document without revealing the entire content.
4. Integration with Decentralized Identifiers (DIDs): Incorporate DIDs for more robust identity management in the verification process.
5. Cross-chain Verification: Develop mechanisms for verifying proofs across different blockchain networks.

Limitations:

1. Computational Complexity: Generating ZK-SNARKs can be computationally intensive, especially for large documents or complex verification rules.
2. Setup Phase: The initial trusted setup required for ZK-SNARKs could be a potential security concern if not properly executed.
3. Quantum Vulnerability: Current ZK-SNARK constructions may be vulnerable to quantum computers in the future.
4. Scalability: As the number of documents grows, managing the Merkle tree efficiently becomes challenging.
5. User Experience: The complexity of the system may make it difficult for non-technical users to understand and trust the process.

Circom ZK Circuit for Document Verification



```
// put your copragma circom 2.0.0;

include "circomlib/poseidon.circom";
include "circomlib/mimcsponge.circom";

template DocumentVerification() {
    signal input document[256]; // 256 field elements representing the document
    signal input documentHash;
    signal input nullifier;
    signal input documentOwner;
    signal input merkleRoot;
    signal input merklePath[20];
    signal input merklePathIndices[20];

    signal output valid;

    // Calculate document hash
    component hasher = Poseidon(256);
    for (var i = 0; i < 256; i++) {
        hasher.inputs[i] <== document[i];
    }
    hasher.out === documentHash;

    // Calculate nullifier
    component nullifierHasher = MiMCSponge(1, 220, 1);
    nullifierHasher.ins[0] <== documentOwner;
    nullifierHasher.k <== documentHash;
    nullifierHasher.out === nullifier;

    // Verify Merkle proof
    component merkleVerifier = MerkleTreeVerifier(20);
    merkleVerifier.leaf <== documentHash;
    merkleVerifier.root <== merkleRoot;
    for (var i = 0; i < 20; i++) {
        merkleVerifier.path[i] <== merklePath[i];
        merkleVerifier.pathIndices[i] <== merklePathIndices[i];
    }

    valid <== merkleVerifier.valid;
}

component main = DocumentVerification();
```

The Circom circuit we've designed implements a zero-knowledge proof system for document verification. It allows a prover to demonstrate knowledge of a document and ownership without revealing the document's contents or the owner's identity. The circuit performs three main operations:

1. Document hashing
2. Nullifier generation
3. Merkle tree verification

A. Poseidon Hash

The circuit uses the Poseidon hash function, which is specifically designed for efficient zero-knowledge proofs. Poseidon is a sponge construction based on the SPN (Substitution-Permutation Network) structure.

Mathematically, for inputs $x_1, x_2, ..., x_n$, the Poseidon hash H is computed as:

$H(x_1, x_2, ..., x_n) = \pi \circ A \circ S \circ A \circ S \circ ... \circ A \circ S (x_1, x_2, ..., x_n, 0, ..., 0)$

Where:

- S is the S-box layer (non-linear operation)
- A is the linear diffusion layer (matrix multiplication)
- π is the squeeze function

The circuit splits the document into 256 field elements and feeds them into the Poseidon hasher. The output is compared with the provided documentHash to ensure integrity.

The nullifier is generated using the MiMC (Minimal Multi-Round Consensus) Sponge function. MiMC is designed for efficient verification in zero-knowledge proofs.

For inputs x and k, the MiMC round function is:

$f(x, k) = (x + k)^3 \bmod p$

Where p is a large prime.

The MiMC Sponge construction uses this round function in a sponge-like structure:

1. Initialize state s = 0
2. For each input block x_i: s = f(s ⊕ x_i, k_i)
3. Squeeze output blocks: y_i = s, then s = f(s, k_i)

In our circuit, we use the document owner's identity and the document hash as inputs to create a unique nullifier, preventing double-spending.

A Merkle tree is a binary tree where each leaf node is the hash of a data block, and each non-leaf node is the hash of its two child nodes.

For a tree with leaves $L_1, L_2, ..., L_n$, the Merkle root R is computed as:

$R = H(H(H(L_1 \| L_2) \| H(L_3 \| L_4)) \| ... \| H(L_{n-1} \| L_n))$

Where H is a hash function and || denotes concatenation.

The circuit verifies that the document hash (leaf) is part of a Merkle tree with the given root. It does this by checking the provided Merkle path:

1. Start with the leaf (document hash)
2. For each level i in the path:
   - If pathIndices[i] is 0, compute H(path[i] || current_node)
   - If pathIndices[i] is 1, compute H(current_node || path[i])
3. The final hash should equal the Merkle root

This process proves inclusion without revealing the position or other documents in the tree.

Circuit Constraints:

The circuit enforces the following constraints:

1. The provided document hashes to the claimed documentHash.
2. The nullifier is correctly computed from the document owner and document hash.
3. The document hash is included in the Merkle tree with the given root.

These constraints collectively ensure that the prover knows a valid document, owns it, and that the document is part of the verified set without revealing any specific information about the document or owner.

Security Properties:

1. Zero-Knowledge: The circuit reveals no information about the document content or owner's identity.
2. Soundness: It is computationally infeasible to generate a valid proof without knowing the document and ownership information.

3. Completeness: Honest provers with valid documents can always generate a proof that verifies correctly.

CONCLUSION

Zero-knowledge document verification using Circom and Iden3 protocol offers a powerful solution for maintaining privacy and security in decentralized systems. By leveraging ZK-SNARKs and efficient cryptographic primitives, it enables document owners to prove the possession and integrity of their documents without revealing sensitive information.

The proposed system demonstrates the potential of zero-knowledge proofs in real-world applications, particularly in scenarios where data privacy is paramount. As blockchain technology continues to evolve, such privacy-preserving mechanisms will play a crucial role in fostering trust and adoption.

However, it's important to acknowledge the current limitations, particularly in terms of computational complexity and scalability. Future research should focus on optimizing proof generation, improving the efficiency of on-chain verification, and exploring more user-friendly interfaces for interacting with zero-knowledge systems.

As the field progresses, we can expect to see more sophisticated zero-knowledge circuits, better integration with existing identity systems, and novel applications across various industries. The continued development of this technology will undoubtedly contribute to a more secure and privacy-respecting digital ecosystem.

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