

# Hybrid Cloud DNS Options for Amazon VPC

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## Abstract

The Domain Name System (DNS) is a foundational element of the internet that underpins many services offered by Amazon Web Services (AWS). Amazon Route 53 Resolver provides resolution with DNS for public domain names, Amazon Virtual Private Cloud (Amazon VPC), and Route 53 private hosted zones.

This whitepaper includes solutions and considerations for advanced DNS architectures to help customers who have workloads with unique DNS requirements, or on-premises resources that require DNS resolution between on-premises data centers and Amazon EC2 instances in Amazon VPCs.

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## Introduction

Many organizations have both on-premises resources and resources in the cloud. DNS name resolution is essential for on-premises and cloud-based resources. For customers with hybrid workloads, which include on-premises and cloud-based resources, extra steps are necessary to configure DNS to work seamlessly across both environments. AWS services that require name resolution could include Elastic Load Balancing load balancer (ELB), Amazon Relational Database Service (Amazon RDS), Amazon Redshift, and Amazon Elastic Compute Cloud (Amazon EC2).

Route 53 Resolver, which is available in all Amazon VPCs, responds to DNS queries for public records, Amazon VPC resources, and Route 53 private hosted zones (PHZs). You can configure it to forward queries to customer managed authoritative DNS servers hosted on-premises, and to respond to DNS queries that your on-premises DNS servers forward to your Amazon VPC.

This whitepaper illustrates several different architectures that you can implement on AWS using native and custom-built solutions. These architectures meet the need for name resolution of on-premises infrastructure from your Amazon VPC and address constraints that have only been partially addressed by previously published solutions.

## Key Concepts

For the latest technical content, refer to the AWS Whitepapers & Guides page:

Before we dive into the solutions, it is important to establish a few concepts and configuration options that we'll reference throughout this whitepaper.

### Amazon VPC DHCP Options Set

The Dynamic Host Configuration Protocol (DHCP) provides a standard for passing configuration information to hosts on a TCP/IP network. The options field of a DHCP message contains configuration parameters such as *domain-name-servers*, *domain-name*, *ntp-servers*, and *netbios-node-type*. In any Amazon VPC, you can create DHCP options sets and specify up to four DNS servers. Currently, these options sets are created and applied per VPC, which means that you can't have a DNS server list at the Availability Zone level.

For more information about DHCP options sets and configuration, see [Overview of DHCP Option Sets](#) in the Amazon VPC Developer Guide.<sup>1</sup>

## Amazon Route 53 Resolver

Route 53 Resolver, also known as the [Amazon DNS Server](#) or Amazon Provided DNS, provides full public DNS resolution, with additional resolution for internal records for the VPC and customer-defined Route 53 private DNS records.<sup>2</sup> Route 53 Resolver maps to a DNS server running on a reserved IP address at the base of the VPC network range, plus two. For example, the DNS Server on a 10.0.0.0/16 network is located at 10.0.0.2. For VPCs with multiple CIDR blocks, the DNS server IP address is located in the primary CIDR block.

## Elastic Network Interfaces (ENIs)

Elastic network interfaces (referred to as *network interfaces* in the Amazon EC2 console) are virtual network interfaces that you can attach to an instance in a VPC. They're available only for instances running in a VPC. A virtual network interface, like any network adapter, is the interface that a device uses to connect to a network. Each instance in a VPC, depending on the instance type, can have multiple network interfaces attached to it.

For more information, see [Elastic Network Interfaces](#) in the *Amazon EC2 User Guide for Linux Instances*.<sup>3</sup>

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## How ENIs Work for Route 53 Resolver

For the latest technical content, refer to the AWS Whitepapers & Guides page:  
A Route 53 Resolver endpoint is made up of one or more ENIs, which reside in your VPC. Each endpoint can only forward queries in a single direction.

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*Inbound endpoints* are available as forwarding targets for DNS resolvers and use an IP address from the subnet space of the VPC to which it is attached. Queries forwarded to these endpoints have the DNS view of the VPC to which the endpoints are attached. Meaning, if there are names local to the VPC, such as AWS PrivateLink endpoints, EFS clusters, EKS clusters, PHZs associated, etc. the query can resolve any of those names. This is also true for any VPCs peered with the VPC, which owns the endpoint.

*Outbound endpoints* serve as the path through which all queries are forwarded out of the VPC. Outbound endpoints are directly attached to the owner VPC and indirectly associated with other VPCs via rules. Meaning, if a forwarding rule is shared with VPC that does not own the outbound endpoint, all queries that match the forwarding rule pass through to the owner VPC and then forward out. It is important to realize this when using queries to forward from one VPC to another. The outbound endpoint may reside in an entirely different Availability Zone than the VPC that originally sent the query, and there is potential for an Availability Zone outage in the owner VPC to impact query

resolution in the VPC using the forwarding rule. This can be avoided by deploying outbound endpoints in multiple Availability Zones.

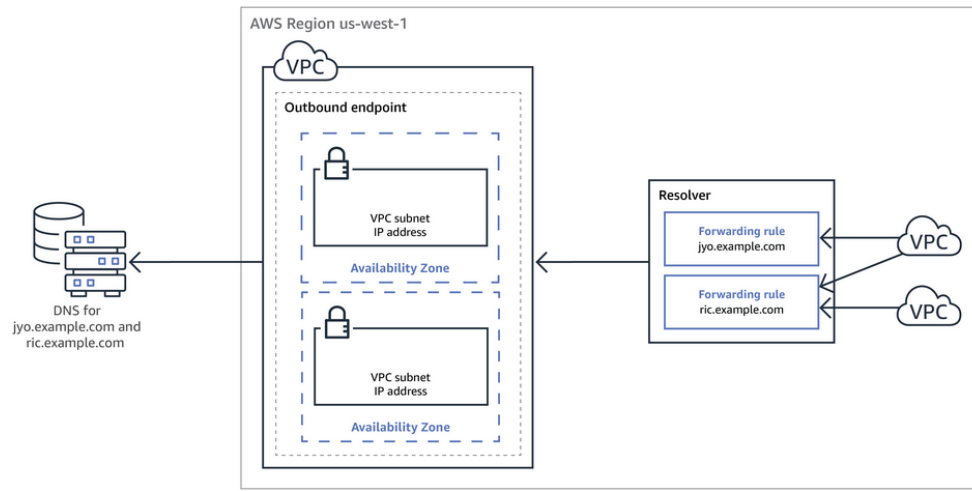


Figure 1: Route 53 Resolver with Outbound Endpoint

See [Getting Started with Route 53 Resolver](#) in the *Amazon Route 53 Developer Guide* for more information.

## This paper has been archived Route 53 Private Hosted Zone

A Route 53 private hosted zone is a container that holds DNS records that are visible to one or more VPCs. VPCs can be associated to the private hosted zone at the time of (or after) the creation of the private hosted zone.

For more information, see [Working with Private Hosted Zones](https://aws.amazon.com/whitepapers) in the *Amazon Route 53 Developer Guide*.<sup>4</sup>

## Connection Tracking

By default, Amazon EC2 security groups use [connection tracking](#) to track information about traffic to and from the instance.<sup>5</sup> Security group rules are applied based on the connection state of the traffic to determine if the traffic is allowed or denied. This allows security groups to be stateful, which means that responses to inbound traffic are allowed to flow out of the instance regardless of outbound security group rules, and vice versa.

## Linux Resolver

The stub resolver in Linux is responsible for initiating and sequencing DNS queries that ultimately lead to a full resolution. A resolver is configured via a configuration file, `/etc/resolv.conf`. The resolver queries the DNS server listed in the `resolv.conf` in the order they are listed.

The following is a sample `resolv.conf`:

```
options timeout:1
nameserver 10.0.0.10
nameserver 10.0.1.10
```

## Linux DHCP Client

The DHCP client on Linux provides the option to customize the set of DNS servers that the instance uses for DNS resolution. The DNS servers provided in the AWS DHCP options are picked up by this DHCP client to further update the `resolv.conf` with a list of DNS Server IP addresses. In addition, you can use the *supersede* DHCP client option to replace the DNS servers provided by the AWS DHCP options set with a static list of DNS servers. You do this by modifying the DHCP client configuration file, `/etc/dhcp/dhclient.conf`.

For the latest technical content, refer to the [AWS](#)

```
interface "eth0"
{
    supersede domain-name-servers 10.0.2.10, 10.0.3.10;
}
```

This sample statement replaces DNS servers 10.0.0.10 and 10.0.1.10 in the `resolv.conf` sample with 10.0.2.10 and 10.0.3.10. We discuss the use of this option in the [Zonal Forwarders Using Supersede](#) solution.

## Conditional Forwarder – Unbound

A conditional forwarder examines the DNS queries received from instances and forwards them to different DNS servers based on rules set in its configuration, typically using the domain name of the query to select the forwarder. In a hybrid architecture, conditional forwarders play a vital role to bridge name resolution between on-premises and cloud resources. For this particular solution we use *Unbound*, which is a recursive and caching DNS resolver, in addition to a conditional forwarder. Depending on your



requirements, this option can act as an alternative or hybrid to forwarding rules in Amazon Route 53 Resolver.

For instructions on how to set up an Unbound DNS server, see the [How to Set Up DNS Resolution Between On-Premises Networks and AWS by Using Unbound](#) blog post in the AWS Security Blog.<sup>6</sup>

The following is a sample unbound.conf:

```
forward-zone:
  name: "."
  forward-addr: 10.0.0.2 # Amazon Provided DNS
forward-zone:
  name: "example.corp"
  forward-addr: 192.168.1.10 # On-premises DNS
```

In this sample, configuration queries to `example.corp` are forwarded to the on-premises DNS server and the rest are forwarded to Route 53 Resolver.

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## Constraints

In addition to the concepts established so far, it is important that you are aware of some constraints that are key in shaping the rest of this whitepaper and its solutions.

### Packet per Second (PPS) per Elastic Network Interface limit

Each network interface in an Amazon VPC has a hard limit of 1024 packets that it can send to the Amazon Provided DNS server every second. Therefore, a computing resource on AWS that has a network interface attached to it, and is sending traffic to the Amazon DNS resolver (for example, an Amazon EC2 instance or AWS Lambda function), falls under this hard-limit restriction. In this whitepaper, we refer to this limit as packet per second (PPS) per network interface. When you're designing a scalable solution for name resolution, you must consider this limit because failure to do so can result in queries to Route 53 Resolver going unanswered if the limit is reached. This limit is a key factor considered for the solutions proposed in this whitepaper. This limit is higher for Route 53 resolver endpoints, which have a limit of approximately 10,000 QPS per elastic network interface.

### Connection Tracking

The number of simultaneous stateful connections that an Amazon EC2 security group can support is limited. For the latest technical content, refer to the AWS Whitepapers & Guides page: <https://aws.amazon.com/whitepapers>. In rare cases, customers with restrictive security group policies and applications that create a large amount of concurrent connections, for instance a self-managed recursive DNS server, may run into issues of exhausting all simultaneous connection tracking resources. When that limit is exceeded, subsequent connections fail silently. In such cases, we recommend that you have a security group set up that you can use to disable connection tracking. To do this, set up permissive rules on both inbound and outbound connections.

### Linux Resolver

The default maximum number of DNS servers that you can specify in the resolv.conf configuration file of a Linux resolver is three, which means it isn't useful to specify four DNS servers in the DHCP options set because the additional DNS server won't be used. This limit further places an upper boundary on some of the solutions discussed in this whitepaper. It is also key to note that different operating systems can handle the assignment and failover of DNS queries differently.

## Solutions

The solutions in this whitepaper present options and best practices to architect a DNS solution in the hybrid cloud, keeping in mind criteria like ease of implementation, management overhead, cost, resilience, and the distribution of DNS queries directed toward the Route 53 Resolver. We cover the following solutions:

- **Route 53 Resolver Endpoints and Forwarding Rules** – This solution focuses on using Route 53 Resolver endpoints to forward traffic between your Amazon VPC and on-premises data center over both AWS Direct Connect and Amazon VPN.
- **Secondary DNS in an Amazon VPC** – This solution focuses on using Route 53 to mirror on-premises DNS zones that can then be natively resolved from within VPCs, without the need for additional DNS forwarding resources.
- **Decentralized Conditional Forwarders** – This solution uses distributed conditional forwarders and provides two options for using them efficiently. While we use unbound as a conditional forwarder in some of these solutions, you can use any DNS server that supports conditional forwarding with similar features.
- **Scaling DNS Management Across Multiple Accounts and VPCs** – This solution walks through options for managing DNS names as you scale your hybrid DNS solution.

For the latest technical content, refer to the **AWS Route 53 Resolver Endpoints and Forwarding Rules** Whitepapers & Guides page:

In November 2018, Route 53 launched Route 53 Resolver endpoints and forwarding rules, which allow you to forward traffic between your Amazon VPC and on-premises data center without having to deploy additional DNS servers.

For more detailed information about Amazon Route 53 Resolver, see the [Amazon Route 53 Resolver Developer Guide](#).

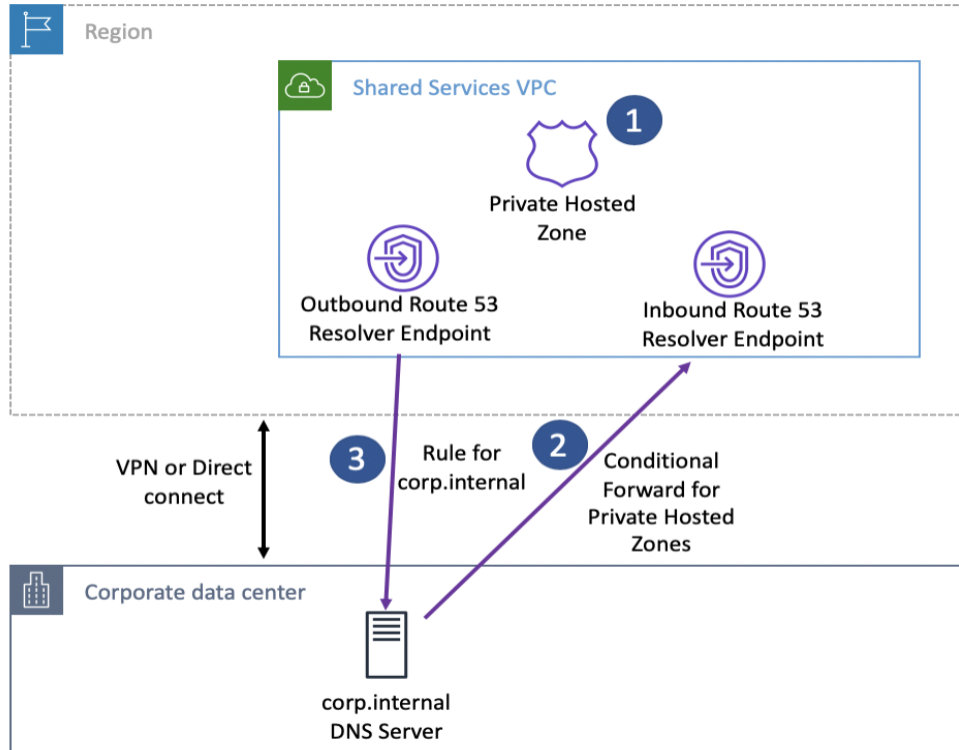
You use the following features of Route 53 resolver in this solution: inbound endpoint, outbound endpoint, and forwarding rules to make the hybrid resolution possible between on-premises and AWS.

| Use Case  | Advantages  | Limitations   |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Customers that must forward queries between an Amazon VPC and on-premises data center</li><li>• Customers that have one or more VPCs connected to an on-premises environment via AWS Direct Connect or Amazon VPN</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Low management overhead, you only have to manage forwarding rules and monitor query limits via CloudWatch alarms</li><li>• Uses the highly available AWS backbone</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Approximately 10,000 QPS limit per elastic network interface on resolver endpoints</li><li>• No logging visibility on queries answered by Resolver</li><li>• Query source IP address is replaced with IP address of the endpoint from which it is forwarded</li></ul> |

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 Figure 2 – Route 53 Resolver Endpoints and Forwarding Rules

| Description |  |
|-------------|--|
| 1           | Private Hosted Zones are supported with Amazon VPC.  |
| 2           | Create forward rules in on-premises DNS server for Route 53 names you want to resolve from on-premises. These rules use an inbound endpoint as their destination.                                      |
| 3           | Create Route 53 Resolver rules for names you want to resolve on-premises from your Amazon VPC. These rules use an outbound endpoint and can be shared with other VPCs through Resource Access Manager. |

**Considerations:**

- Though you can have multiple VPCs across many accounts, only a single, Availability Zone redundant set of inbound endpoints is required in your Shared Services VPC.
- You only need one outbound endpoint for multiple VPCs. You don't have to create an outbound endpoint in each VPC. Instead, you share an outbound endpoint by sharing the rule(s) created for that endpoint with additional accounts using Resource Access Manager (RAM).
- Endpoints cannot be used across Regions.

**Best Practices:**

- Manually specify the private IP addresses of the inbound Route 53 resolver endpoint while creating it, as opposed to having the resolver choose a random IP address from the subnet. This way, in case there is an accidental deletion of the endpoint, you can reuse those IP addresses.
- When you create the inbound or outbound endpoints, we recommend that you use at least two subnets in different Availability Zones for high availability. For inbound resolver, make sure that you use both endpoint IP addresses in your on-premises DNS resolver so that the load can be spread across all available IP addresses.
- For environments that require a high number of queries per second, you should be aware that there is a limit on the number of elastic network interfaces in an endpoint. More ENIs can be added to an endpoint to scale QPS.  
<https://aws.amazon.com/whitepapers>
- We publish InboundQueryVolume and OutboundQueryVolume metrics via CloudWatch and recommend that you set up monitoring rules that alert you if the threshold exceeds a certain value (for example, 80% of 10,000 QPS).

## Secondary DNS in an Amazon VPC

Alternatively, you may decide to deploy and manage additional DNS infrastructure running on EC2 instances to handle DNS requests either from VPCs or on-premises, where you can still benefit from using AWS Managed Services.

This approach uses Route 53 private hosted zones with AWS Lambda and Amazon CloudWatch Events to mirror on-premises DNS zones. This can then be natively resolved from within a VPC without conditional forwarding, and without a real-time dependency on on-premises DNS servers.

For the full solution, see the [Powering Secondary DNS in a VPC using AWS Lambda and Amazon Route 53 Private Hosted Zones](#) on the AWS Compute blog.<sup>7</sup>

The following table outlines this solution:

*Table 1 – Solution Highlights – Secondary DNS in an Amazon VPC*

| Use Case   | Advantages  | Limitations  |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Customers cannot use the native Route 53 Resolver forwarding features</li> <li>Customers that do not want to build or manage conditional forwarder instances</li> <li>Customers that do not have in-house DevOps expertise.</li> <li>Infrequently changing DNS environment</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Low management overhead</li> <li>Low operational cost</li> <li>Highly resilient DNS infrastructure</li> <li>Low possibility for instances to breach the VPC per network interface limit</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>On-premises instances can't use Route 53 Resolver directly for Amazon EC2 hostnames without creating a forwarding target</li> <li>Works well only when on-premises DNS server records must be replicated to Route 53</li> <li>Requires on-premises DNS server to support full zone transfer query</li> <li>Requires working with the Route 53 API limits</li> </ul> |

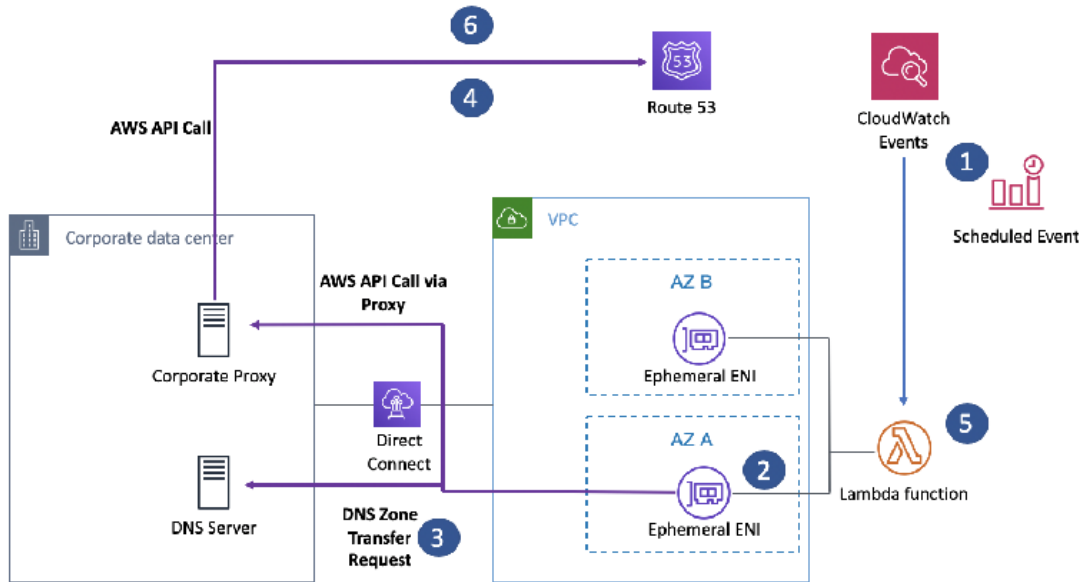


Figure 3 – Secondary DNS running on Route 53 private hosted zones

| Description |   |
|-------------|---|
| 1           | CloudWatch Event triggers a Lambda function. The scheduled event is configured based on a JSON string that is passed to the Lambda function that sets a number of parameters, including the DNS domain, source DNS server, and Route 53 zone ID. This configuration allows it to use a single Lambda function for multiple zones. |
| 2           | A new network interface is created in the VPC's subnets and attached to the Lambda function. This allows the function to access any internal network resources based on the security group that you defined.  |
| 3           | The Lambda function transfers the source DNS zone from the IP address specified in the JSON parameters. Configure DNS servers to allow full zone transfers, which happen over TCP and UDP port 53.  |
| 4           | The Route 53 DNS zone is retrieved using the AWS API.   |
| 5           | The two zone files are compared, and then the resulting differences are returned as a set of actions to be performed using Route 53.  |
| 6           | Updates to the Route 53 zone are made using the AWS API, and then the Start of Authority (SOA) is updated to match the source version.  |



There are several benefits to using this approach. Aside from the initial solution setup, there is little management overhead after the environment is set up as the solution continues working without any manual intervention. Also, there is no client-side setup because the DHCP options that you set configure each instance to use Route 53 Resolver (aka AmazonProvidedDNS) by default.

This solution can be one of the more scalable hybrid DNS solutions in a VPC because queries for any domain go directly to Route 53 Resolver from each instance and then to the Amazon Route 53 infrastructure. This ensures that each instance uses its own PPS per network interface limit. There is also no correlation and impact of implementing this solution in one or more VPCs as you choose to associate the Route 53 hosted zone with multiple VPCs. The possibility of failure of a DNS component is lower because of the highly available and reliable Amazon Route 53 infrastructure. Note however that there is a hard limit of 1,000 private hosted zone associations.

The main disadvantage of this solution is that it requires full zone transfer query (AXFR) so it isn't appropriate for customers that run DNS servers that don't support AXFR. Also, because this solution involves working with the Route 53 APIs, you must stay within the [Route 53 API limits](#).<sup>8</sup>

This solution does not provide a method for resolving EC2 records from on premises directly.

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For the latest technical content, refer to the AWS  
**Decentralized Conditional Forwarders**  
Whitepapers & Guides page:

While the Route 53 solution enables you to avoid the complexities in running a hybrid DNS architecture, you might still prefer to configure your DNS infrastructure to use conditional forwarders within your VPCs. One reason you may choose to run your own forwarders is to log DNS queries. See *DNS Logging* (under additional considerations) to determine if this is right for you.

There are two options under this solution. The first option, called *highly distributed forwarders* discusses how to run forwarders on every instance of the environment trying to mimic the scale that the Route 53 solution provides. The second option, called *zonal forwarders using supersede* presents a strategy of localizing forwarders to a specific Availability Zone and its instances.

The following table highlights these two options followed by their detailed discussion:

Table 2 – Solution highlights – Decentralized conditional forwarders

| Option                                  | Use Case  | Advantages  | Limitations   |
|---|---|---|---|
| <b>Highly Distributed Forwarders</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workload generates high volumes of DNS queries</li> <li>• Infrequently changing DNS environment</li> </ul>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resilient DNS infrastructure</li> <li>• Low possibility for instances to breach the PPS per network interface limit</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complex setup and management</li> <li>• Investment in relevant skill sets for configuration management</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Zonal Forwarders using Supersede</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customers with existing set of conditional forwarders</li> <li>• Environment that doesn't generate a high volume of DNS traffic</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fewer forwarders to manage</li> <li>• Zonal isolation provides better overall resiliency</li> </ul>                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complex setup and management as the DNS environment grows</li> <li>• Possibility of breaching the PPS per network interfaces limit is higher than the highly distributed option</li> </ul> |

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## Highly Distributed Forwarders

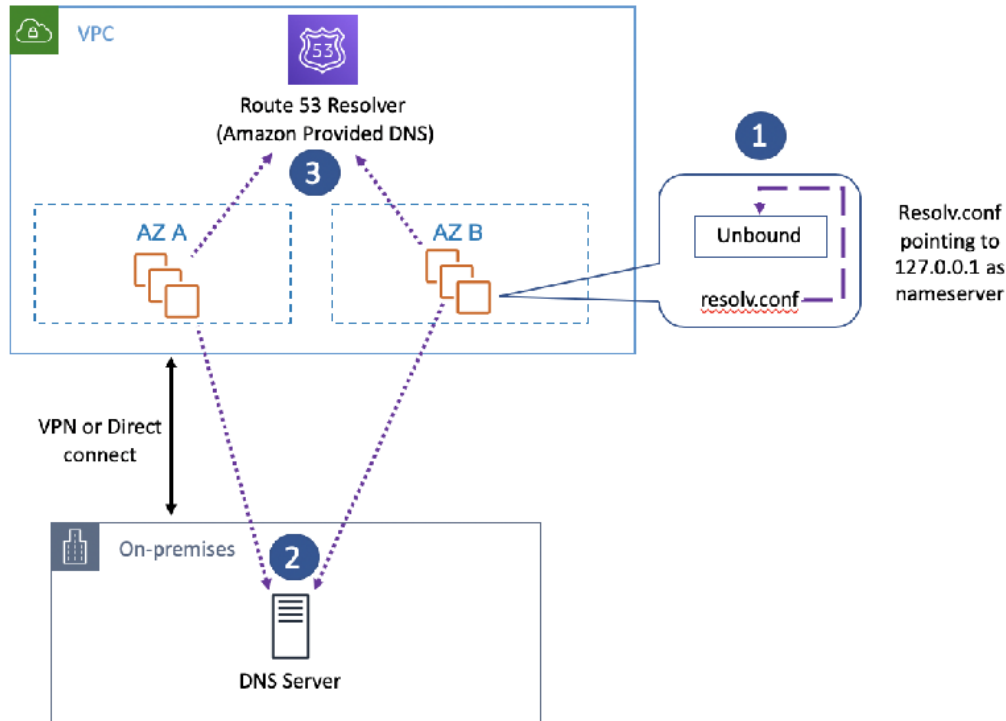
This option decentralizes forwarders and runs a small lightweight DNS forwarder on every instance in the environment. The forwarder is configured to serve the DNS needs of only the instance it is running on, which eliminates bottlenecks and dependency on a central set of instances.

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Given the implementation and management complexity of this solution we recommend that you use a mature configuration management solution.

The following diagram shows how this solution functions in a single VPC:



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**Description**

- 1 Each instance in the VPC runs its own conditional forwarder (unbound). The resolv.conf has a `nameserver` attribute pointing to 127.0.0.1. A straightforward approach for modifying resolv.conf would be by creating DHCP options set that has 127.0.0.1 as the `domain-name-server` value. You may alternatively choose to overwrite any existing DHCP options settings using the `supersede` option in the `dhclient.conf`.
- 2 Records requested for on-premises hosted zones are forwarded to the on-premises DNS server by the forwarder running locally on the instance.
- 3 Any requests that don't match the on-premises forwarding filters are forwarded to Resolver.

Similar to the Route 53 solution, this solution allows every single instance to use the limit of 1024 PPS per network interfaces to Route 53 Resolver to its full potential. The solution also scales up as additional instances are added and works the same way regardless of whether you're using a single or multi-VPC setup. The DNS infrastructure

is low latency and the failure of a DNS component such as an individual forwarder does not affect the entire fleet due to the decoupled nature of the design.

This solution poses implementation and management complexities, especially as the environment grows. You can manage and modify configuration files at instance launch using Amazon EC2 [user data](#).<sup>9</sup> After instance launch, you can use the [Amazon EC2 Run Command](#)<sup>10</sup> or [AWS OpsWorks for Chef Automate](#)<sup>11</sup> to deploy and maintain your configuration files.

The implementation of these solutions is outside the scope of this whitepaper, but it is important to know that they provide the flexibility and power to manage configuration files and their state at a large scale. Greater flexibility brings with it the challenge of greater complexity. Consider additional operational costs, including the need to have an in-house DevOps workforce.

## Zonal Forwarders Using Supersede

If you don't want to manage and implement a forwarder on each instance of your environment, and you want to have conditional forwarder instances as the center piece of your hybrid DNS architecture, you should consider this option.

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For this option, you localize instances in an Availability Zone to forward queries to conditional forwarders only in the same Availability Zone of the Amazon VPC. For reasons discussed in the [Subnet Resolution](#) section, you reference all three DNS servers in their resolution, as shown in the following diagram.

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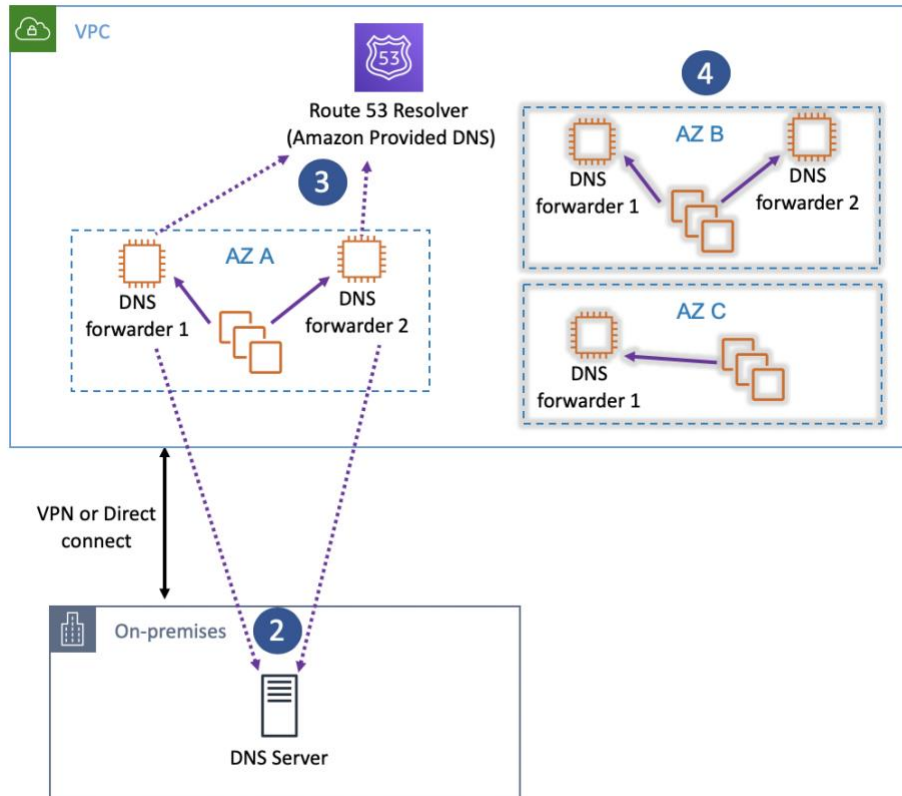


Figure 5 – Zonal forwarders with supersede option

| Description |   |
|-------------|---|
| 1           | Instances in Availability Zone A are configured using the supersede option, which uses a list of DNS forwarders that are local to that Availability Zone. To avoid burdening any specific forwarder in the Availability Zone, randomize the order for the DNS forwarders across instances in the Availability Zone. |
| 2           | Records requested for on-premises hosted zones are directly forwarded to the on-premises DNS server by the DNS forwarder.   |
| 3           | Any requests that don't match the on-premises forwarding filters are forwarded to the Route 53 Resolver. This illustration doesn't depict the actual flow of traffic. It's presented for representation purposes only.  |
| 4           | Similarly, other Availability Zones in the VPC can be set up to use their own set of local conditional forwarders that serve the respective Availability Zone. You determine the number of conditional forwarders serving an Availability Zone based on your need and the importance of the environment.            |

If one of the three instances in Availability Zone A fails, the other two instances continue serving DNS traffic. It is important to note that placement groups must be used in order to guarantee that the forwarders are not running on the same parent hardware, which is a single point of failure. To ensure separate parent hardware, you may set up and take advantage of [Amazon Elastic Cloud Compute Placement Groups](#) to avoid this type of failure domain.

If all three DNS forwarders in Availability Zone A fail at the same time, the instances in Availability Zone A fails to resolve any DNS requests because they are unaware of the presence of forwarders in other Availability Zones. This prevents the impact from spreading to multiple Availability Zones and ensures that other Availability Zones continue to function normally.

Currently, the DHCP options that you set apply to the VPC as a whole. Therefore, you must self-manage the list of DNS servers that are local to instances in each Availability Zone. In addition, we recommend that you don't use the same order of DNS servers in your `resolv.conf` for all instances in the Availability Zone because it would burden the first server in the list and push it closer to breaching the PPS per network interfaces limit. While each Linux instance can only have three resolvers, if you're managing the resolver list yourself, you can have as many resolvers as you wish per Availability Zone. Each instance should be configured with three random resolvers from the resolver list.

## Scaling DNS Management Across Multiple Accounts and VPCs

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In alignment with AWS best practices, many organizations tend to build out a cloud environment with multiple accounts. Whether you're using Shared VPCs with multiple accounts hosted in a single VPC to share resources, or using the more traditional model where a VPC is tied to a single account, there are architectural considerations that must be made. This whitepaper focuses on the more traditional model.

For more information on Shared VPCs, see [Working with Shared VPCs](#).

While having multiple accounts and VPCs helps provide a reduction of blast radius and granular account-level billing, it can make DNS infrastructure more complex. Route 53's ability to associate Private Hosted Zones (PHZs) with VPCs and accounts helps reduce these complexities for both centralized and de-centralized architectures. We discuss both centralized and decentralized design paradigms in this section.

## Multi-Account Centralized

In this type of architecture Route 53 Private Hosted Zones (PHZs) are centralized in a shared services VPC. This allows for central DNS management while enabling inbound Route 53 resolver endpoints to natively query the Private Hosted Zones. This leaves the need for VPC-to-VPC DNS resolution unaddressed. Fortunately, PHZs can be associated with many VPCs. A simple CLI or API request can associate each PHZ with VPCs in accounts outside of the shared services VPC.

More information about cross-account PHZ sharing, see [Associating an Amazon VPC and a Private Hosted Zone That You Created with Different AWS Accounts](#).

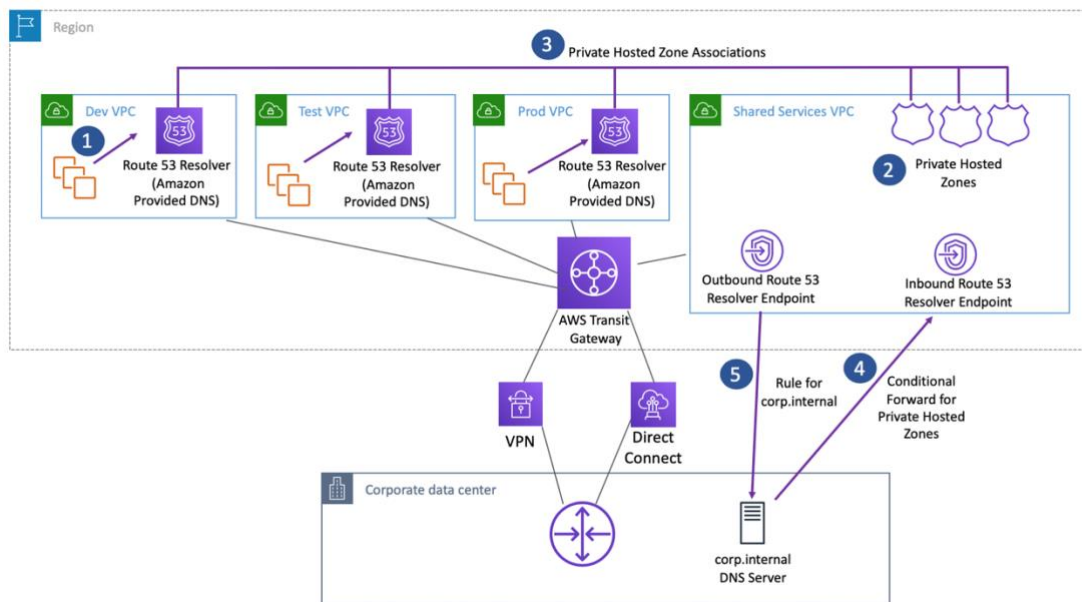


Figure 6 – Multi-Account Centralized DNS with Private Hosted Zone sharing

### Description

- 1 Instances within a VPC use the Route 53 Resolver (Amazon Provided DNS).
- 2 Private hosted zones are associated with a shared services VPC.
- 3 Private hosted zones are also associated with other VPCs in the environment.
- 4 Conditional forward rule(s) from the on-premises DNS servers have an inbound Route 53 Resolver endpoint as their destination.
- 5 Rule(s) for on-premises domain names are created that leverage an outbound Route 53 Resolver endpoint.

While this architecture provides for centralization, you may require each VPC to have its own fully qualified domain name (FQDN) hosted within each account so that account owners can change and modify their own DNS records. The next section provides more information on how this design paradigm is accomplished.

### Multi-Account Decentralized

An organization may want to delegate DNS ownership and management to each AWS account. This can have the advantages of decentralization of control and isolating the blast radius for failure to a specific account. The ability to associate PHZs to VPCs between accounts again becomes useful in this scenario. Each VPC can have its own PHZ(s) and then associate it with multiple other VPCs, across accounts and across Regions. This architecture is depicted in Figure 7. For unified resolution with the on-premises environment this only requires that the shared services VPC be associated with each VPC hosting a PHZ.

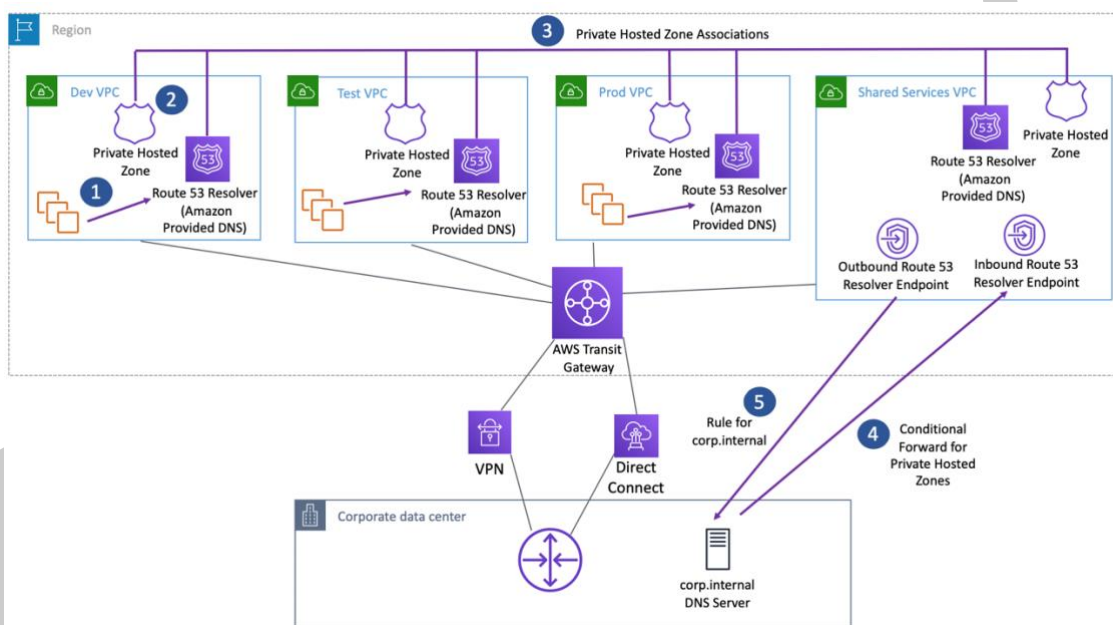


Figure 7 – Multi-Account DNS Decentralized

| Description |  |
|-------------|--|
| 1           | Instances within a VPC use the Route 53 Resolver (Amazon Provided DNS).      |
| 2           | Private hosted zones are associated with a shared services VPC.              |
| 3           | Private hosted zones are also associated with other VPCs in the environment. |



| Description |   |
|-------------|---|
| 4           | Conditional forward rule(s) from the on-premises DNS servers have an inbound Route 53 Resolver endpoint as their destination. |
| 5           | Rule(s) for on-premises domain names are created that leverage an outbound Route 53 Resolver endpoint.                        |

## Alternative Approaches

Alternative approaches have historically been to deploy DNS proxy servers in EC2 instances or to rely on Active Directory DNS servers. This centralization was desired, but did not take advantage of the benefits of using the Route 53 Resolver and can cause scaling as well as availability constraints.

Similarly, a common anti-pattern is to use Route 53 Resolver endpoints to centralize the management of DNS within a shared services VPC or Transit Gateway. This is done by creating both an inbound and outbound endpoint in the shared services VPC and then creating forwarding rules whose target is the IP address of the inbound endpoint in the centralized VPC. These rules are then associated with other VPCs, which will use the inbound endpoint of the central VPC to resolve their DNS queries. This has the effect of allowing spoke VPCs to use the DNS view of the central VPC. For example, if you have an EFS mount in the central VPC, the spoke VPC would be able to resolve the EFS mount's DNS name by forwarding its query to the inbound endpoint of the VPC where the file system is mounted.

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This approach is NOT preferred. Cross-account sharing of PHZs is highly available and less costly than query forwarding. This is because PHZ sharing preserves Availability Zone isolation, meaning that your queries in VPC A are answered by an Availability Zone local to VPC A, whereas your queries in VPC B are answered by an Availability Zone local to VPC B. This means that in the event of an availability problem in VPC A, VPC B's queries would not be affected, as long as they are in two different Availability Zones. There is no additional cost to associate a PHZ with a VPC and you can share a VPC with upwards of 1000 zones.

Query forwarding is optimized for sending queries to other DNS resolvers located outside the AWS network. It provides a way to allow DNS resolvers from different networks to access each other when they would normally not be visible via a recursive DNS lookup. If you choose to use query forwarding in order to resolve DNS answers local to another VPC, you would must get an endpoint for every VPC for which you want

this view of DNS. Additionally, using endpoints to answer queries between VPCs breaks the previously mentioned Availability Zone isolation. Meaning that instead of each VPC resolving queries within its local Availability Zone, you have now made several VPCs dependent on the availability of a single VPC.

Regarding limits, each endpoint elastic network interface has a limit of 10,000 QPS, but keep in mind that if you want to use an endpoint to centralize DNS management you are forwarding more query volume to a central VPC as opposed to distributing the query load between multiple VPCs. This anti-pattern is generally not recommended.

## Selecting the Best Solution for Your Organization

There are various advantages and trade-offs with each of these solutions. Choosing the right solution for your organization depends on the specific requirements of each workload. You might choose to run different solutions in different VPCs to meet the needs of your specific workloads. The following table summarizes the criteria that you can use to evaluate what will work best for your organization. These include the complexity of the implementation, the management overhead, the availability of the solution, probability of hitting the PPS per network interface limit, and the cost of the solution.

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Table 4 – Solutions selection criteria

|                               | Route 53 Resolver | Secondary DNS in a VPC | Highly Distributed Forwarders | Zonal Forwarders |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|
| Implementation complexity     | Low               | Medium                 | High                          | High             |
| Management overhead           | Low               | Low                    | High                          | Medium           |
| DNS Infrastructure resiliency | High              | High                   | High                          | Medium           |
| PPS limit breach              | Low               | Low                    | Low                           | Medium           |
| Cost*                         | Low               | Low                    | High                          | Medium           |

\* Cost is a combination of the infrastructure and operational expense.

## Additional Considerations

### DNS Logging

DNS logging refers to logging specific DNS query from individual host. Typically, these logs are stored for security forensics and compliance. GuardDuty provides machine learning based forensics and anomaly detection on recursive queries originating from local VPC resources. If raw historical logging is not required, GuardDuty may satisfy your requirements without any additional heavy lifting.

Route 53 provides query logs for public hosted zones. If customers require logging for Private Hosted Zones and queries that originate from resources within a VPC, they have several options while still following the Well-Architected Framework and DNS best practices.

Centralized query logging, distributed (on-instance) query logging, and a hybrid approach to log a percentage of queries based on user-defined domain whitelisting, are three of the most popular and scalable methods for query logging available today.

### Centralized Query Logging

Query logging is accomplished in a centralized fashion when all queries are forwarded to a resolver that is not the Route 53 Resolver (Amazon Provided DNS). This resolver can be local to the VPC such as several instances running unbound, or an on-premises resource over DX, VPN, or the Internet Gateway. The latter adds additional latency and dependencies outside of the VPC, and is typically not recommended for that reason. As with any centralized or distributed system it comes with pros and cons.

Centralization of query logs allows for easy aggregation and a single plane of glass to view and parse DNS client queries. With centralization, additional attention needs be directed at the scale of the instances acting as resolvers and number of queries that are directed at any single instance. These instances become single points of failure and can become a barrier due to DNS packets per second limits. Each EC2 instance is limited to 1024 packets per second for DNS queries toward the Route 53 Resolver (Amazon Provided DNS). If the request being sent to the customer managed instance-based DNS resolvers are not distributed effectively and are not implementing caching techniques, with high volume the DNS instances may exceed the 1024 per instance packet per second limit to the Route 53 Resolver DNS resolver with the VPC.

## Distributed Query Logging

Another approach is logging DNS queries in a distributed fashion on instance. This is accomplished by running unbound or another logging capable resolver or forwarder on each instance that requires logging. With the distributed model of logging DNS queries, each instance runs a local resolver in order to capture all DNS queries locally on each instance. These logs can then be aggregated upstream to a centralized Amazon S3 bucket for historical collection and centralized parsing. Depending on the aggregation process this may create a delayed ability for centralized parsing and forensics, but removes any single points of failure and reduces the overall blast radius of any given upstream instance-based resolver failure. If On-Demand Instance parsing is required the delivery Window can be shorted. Depending on your operational model, you may or may not allow on-box forensics or external access so the logging delivery schedule should be considered.

With the launch of VPC Traffic mirroring at re:Inforce 2019, an alternative off-instance distributed logging mechanism can be achieved for supported instance types. At this time, all AWS Nitro based instances support VPC Traffic Mirroring. By enabling traffic mirroring for TCP and UDP-based traffic on port 53 on individual instance ENIs, you have the ability to capture DNS requests in PCAP format. Traffic Mirroring for DNS logs shares similar availability and scalability constructs as other distributed methods, but increases simplicity and flexibility as it does not require the application or Amazon Machine Image (AMI) to incorporate any additional DNS logic. A Traffic Mirroring session can be attached and detached to instance ENIs as needed. Traffic Mirroring is priced per elastic network interface that traffic mirroring is enabled on and the customer is responsible for configuring and managing the traffic mirror target.

For more information on Amazon VPC Traffic Mirroring, see [Traffic Mirroring Concepts](#).

## Hybrid Query Logging

The third option is a hybrid approach that allows more granularity on what queries are filtered. This approach may be desired when companies are able to define “trusted” zones and “untrusted” zones.

Trusted zones are approved by the organization and may not require logging, while anything unapproved falls under the untrusted category to be logged and possibly acted upon such as a blacklist of the response. For example, any zones that are owned and operated by the organization and VPC local resources are trusted and everything else is to be logged and controlled. This hybrid approach is now possible with the release of the Amazon Route 53 Resolver Service because of its ability to provide conditional

forwarding rules by zone. In this approach all local VPC resources resolve to Route 53 Resolver (Amazon Provided DNS) as normal, but when a query is made to an untrusted zone that matches an Amazon Route 53 Resolver conditional forwarding rule it will then be forwarded to a specified instance or on-premises based resolver such as the centralized DNS resolver mentioned above. This approach does not require any modifications on the instance and removes any single points of failure for all trusted zones.

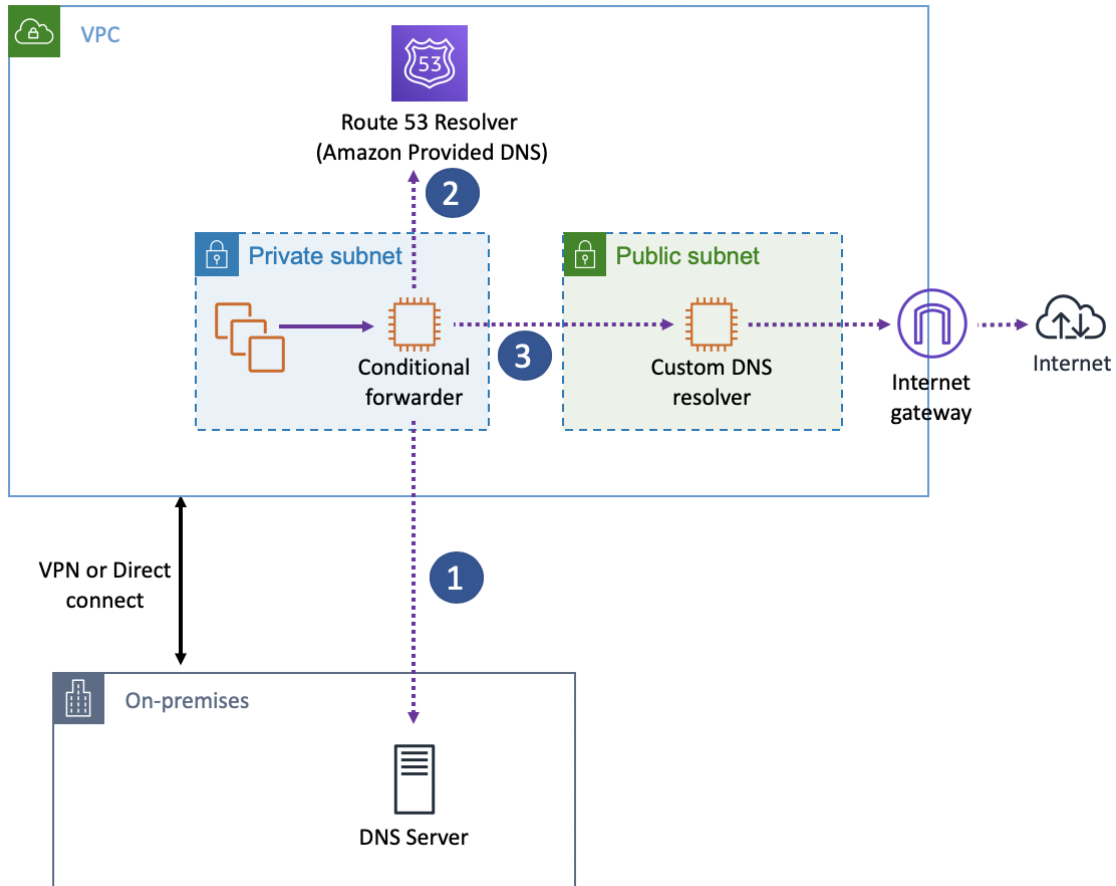
## Custom EC2 DNS Resolver

You can choose to host your own custom DNS resolver on Amazon EC2 that leverages public DNS Servers to perform recursive public DNS resolution instead of using Route 53 Resolver. This is a good choice because of the nature of the application and the ability to have more control and flexibility over the DNS environment. You could also do this if the PPS per network interface limit is a hindrance in your ability to scale and none of the solutions discussed thus far suit your needs.

This whitepaper does not describe the details of architecting such a solution, but we wanted to point out some caveats that will help you plan better in such a scenario. The following diagram illustrates an approach to a hybrid VPC DNS setup where you have your own DNS resolver on Amazon EC2.

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 Figure 8 – Amazon EC2 DNS instances with segregated resolver and forwarder

| Description |   |
|-------------|---|
| 1           | DNS queries for internal EC2 names and Route 53 private hosted zones are forwarded to Route 53 Resolver.  |
| 2           | DNS queries bound for on-premises servers are conditionally forwarded to on-premises DNS servers.   |
| 3           | DNS queries for public domains are conditionally forwarded to the custom DNS resolver in the public subnet. The resolver then recursively resolves public domains using the latest root hints available from the Internet Assigned Number Authority (IANA). |

For security reasons, we recommend that the Conditional forwarder instance that requires connectivity to on-premises sits separately in a private subnet of the VPC. As

the custom DNS resolver must be able to query public DNS Servers, it runs in its own public subnet of the VPC.

Ideally, you would have security group rules on the EC2 instance running the custom DNS resolver but if this custom DNS resolver has high rates of querying out to the internet, then there is a possibility that you will hit connection tracking limits as discussed in the [connection tracking](#) section. Therefore, to avoid running into such a scenario, connection tracking by itself must be avoided and it is possible to do so by opening up all ports, TCP and UDP, to the whole world at the security group level, both inbound and outbound.

As this is granting permissive rules to instance level security group, you will have to handle the security of the instance at a different layer. At the least, it is recommended to control the traffic entering into the entire public subnet by using [Network Access Control Lists \(NACL\)](#), which thereby restricts access to the instance or you could use application level control mechanisms like *access-control* provided by a DNS resolver like Unbound.<sup>12</sup>

Custom DNS resolvers might develop a reputation upstream on the internet. If the instance is assigned a dynamic public IP address that belonged to another customer and previously earned a bad reputation, requests upstream could be throttled or even blocked. To avoid being throttled or blocked, consider assigning Elastic IP addresses to these resolver instances. This provides these IP addresses that talk to the upstream servers with the opportunity to build a good reputation over time that can be owned and maintained. Scaling concerns can be mitigated through the use of a DNS server fleet sitting behind a Network Load Balancer (NLB) that is configured with both TCP and UDP listener on port 53.

## Microsoft Windows Instances

Typically, Microsoft Windows instances are joined using Active Directory Domain Services (AD DS). In scenarios where you use the Amazon VPC DHCP options set, unlike the Linux resolver, you can set the full set of four DNS servers. You can set the DNS servers independently from the DHCP supplied IP address similar to the *supersede* option discussed earlier. This can be accomplished using Active Directory Group Policy or via configuration management tools such as [Amazon EC2 Run Command](#)<sup>13</sup> or [AWS OpsWorks for Chef Automate](#)<sup>14</sup> mentioned earlier. In addition, the Windows DNS client also enables you to cache recently resolved queries, which reduces the overall demand on the primary DNS server.

The Windows DNS client service is designed to prompt a dynamic update from the DNS server if a change is made to its IP address information. When prompted, the DNS server updates the host record IP address for that computer (according to RFC 2136). Microsoft DNS provides support for dynamic updates and this is enabled by default in any Active Directory integrated DNS zone. When you use a lightweight forwarder like unbound for Windows instances, note that there isn't any support for these dynamic updates and it can't support RFC 2126. If you want to do this, you should use the Microsoft DNS server as a primary for these instances.

## Unbound – Additional Options

Unbound caches the results for subsequent queries until the time to live (TTL) expires, after which it forwards the request. By enabling the *prefetch* option in unbound, you can ensure that frequently used records are pre-fetched before they expire to keep the cache up-to-date. Also, if the on-premises DNS server is not available when the cache expires, unbound returns SERVFAIL. To protect yourself against such a situation, you can enable the *serve-expired* option to serve old responses from the cache with a TTL of zero in the response without waiting for the actual resolution to finish. After the resolution is completed the response is cached for subsequent use.

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## DNS Forwarder – Forward First

Some DNS servers (notably BIND) include a *forward first* option enabled by default, which causes the server to query the forwarder first and, if there is no response, to recursively retry the internet DNS servers. For private DNS domains in this scenario, the internet DNS servers return an authoritative NXDOMAIN, which is a non-existent Internet or Intranet domain name, or they return the public address if you're using split horizon DNS for public zones, which is used to provide different answers for private vs public IP addresses. Therefore, it is critical to specify the forward only option which specifies that retries are made against the forwarders, which means that you avoid ever seeing the response from public name servers. The unbound DNS server has the forward first option disabled by default.

## DNS Server Resiliency

The solutions in this whitepaper are intended to provide high availability in the event that there is an issue with your primary DNS server. However, there are factors that can prevent or delay this failover from occurring. These factors include, but are not limited to, the timeout value in *resolv.conf*, configuration issues with the superseded DNS, or incorrect DHCP options set settings. In some cases, these factors could impact the availability of



applications that are dependent on name resolution. There are a few simple approaches to ensure the resilience of your forwarders in case there is an issue with the underlying hardware or instance software. While these approaches don't eliminate the need for well-architected design, they can help you increase the overall resiliency of your solution.

## EC2 Instance Recovery

In the case of an underlying hardware failure of a DNS forwarder instance, you can use EC2 instance recovery to start the instance on a new host. A recovered instance is identical to the original instance, including the instance ID, private IP addresses, Elastic IP addresses, and all instance metadata. To do this, you can create a CloudWatch alarm that monitors an EC2 instance and automatically recovers the instance if it becomes impaired. You can use the CloudWatch alarm to monitor issues like loss of network connectivity, loss of system power, software issues on the physical host, or hardware issues on the physical host that affect network reachability.

For more information about instance recovery, see [Recover Your Instance](#) in the *Amazon EC2 User Guide for Linux Instances*.<sup>15</sup> For step-by-step instructions on using CloudWatch alarms to recover an instance, see [Create Alarms That Stop, Terminate, Reboot or Recover an Instance](#) in the *Amazon EC2 User Guide for Linux Instances*.<sup>16</sup>

## Secondary IP Address

In an Amazon VPC, instances can be assigned secondary IP addresses which are transferrable. If an instance fails, the secondary IP can be transferred to a standby instance and this avoids the need for every instance to reconfigure their resolver IP addresses. This approach redirects traffic to the healthy instance so that it can respond to DNS queries. This approach is appropriate for scenarios where EC2 instance recovery might not provide fast enough recovery or might not be appropriate (for example, an operating system fault or software issue). For more information about working with multiple IP addresses, see [Multiple IP Addresses](#) in the *Amazon EC2 User Guide for Linux Instances*.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

For organizations with on-premises resources, operating in a hybrid architecture is a necessary part of the cloud adoption process. As such architecture patterns that streamline this transition are essential for success.

We discussed concepts as well as constraints to help you obtain a better understanding of the fundamental building blocks of the solutions provided here, as well as the limitations that help to create the most optimal solution for your workload. The solutions that were provided, included how to use Route 53 Resolver endpoints with conditional forwarding rules, how to set up Secondary DNS in the Amazon VPC with AWS Lambda and Route 53 Private hosted zones, and solutions leveraging decentralized forwarders using the Unbound DNS server. We also provided guidance on how to select the appropriate solution for your intended workload. Finally, we examined some additional considerations to help you to better tailor your solution for different workload requirements, faster failover and better DNS server resiliency.

By using the architectures provided you can achieve the most ideal private DNS interoperability between your on-premises environments and your Amazon VPC.

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## Document Revisions

| Date           | Description        |
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| November 2019  | Minor edits.       |
| September 2019 | Fourth Publication |
| June 2018      | Third Publication  |
| November       | Second Publication |
| October 2017   | First Publication  |

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>[http://docs.aws.amazon.com/AmazonVPC/latest/UserGuide/VPC\\_DHCP\\_Options.html#DHCPOptionSets](http://docs.aws.amazon.com/AmazonVPC/latest/UserGuide/VPC_DHCP_Options.html#DHCPOptionSets)

<sup>2</sup>[http://docs.aws.amazon.com/AmazonVPC/latest/UserGuide/VPC\\_DHCP\\_Options.html#AmazonDNS](http://docs.aws.amazon.com/AmazonVPC/latest/UserGuide/VPC_DHCP_Options.html#AmazonDNS)

<sup>3</sup><http://docs.aws.amazon.com/AWSSEC2/latest/UserGuide/using-network-security.html>

<sup>4</sup><http://docs.aws.amazon.com/Route53/latest/DeveloperGuide/hosted-zones-private.html>

<sup>5</sup><http://docs.aws.amazon.com/AWSSEC2/latest/UserGuide/using-network-security.html#security-group-connection-tracking>

<sup>6</sup><https://aws.amazon.com/blogs/security/how-to-set-up-dns-resolution-between-on-premises-networks-and-aws-by-using-unbound/>

<sup>7</sup><https://aws.amazon.com/blogs/compute/powering-secondary-dns-in-a-vpc-using-aws-lambda-and-amazon-route-53-private-hosted-zones/>

<sup>8</sup><http://docs.aws.amazon.com/Route53/latest/DeveloperGuide/DNSLimitations.html#limits-api-requests>

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- 9 <http://docs.aws.amazon.com/AWSEC2/latest/UserGuide/user-data.html>
- 10 <https://aws.amazon.com/ec2/run-command/>
- 11 <https://aws.amazon.com/opsworks/chefautomate/>
- 12 [http://docs.aws.amazon.com/AmazonVPC/latest/UserGuide/VPC\\_ACLs.html](http://docs.aws.amazon.com/AmazonVPC/latest/UserGuide/VPC_ACLs.html)
- 13 <https://aws.amazon.com/ec2/run-command/>
- 14 <https://aws.amazon.com/opsworks/chefautomate/>
- 15 <http://docs.aws.amazon.com/AWSEC2/latest/UserGuide/ec2-instance-recover.html>
- 16 <http://docs.aws.amazon.com/AWSEC2/latest/UserGuide/UsingAlarmActions.html>
- 17 <http://docs.aws.amazon.com/AWSEC2/latest/UserGuide/MultipleIP.html>

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