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Guidance for External Pre-Shared Key (PSK) Usage in TLS

Abstract

This document provides usage guidance for external Pre-Shared Keys (PSKs) in Transport Layer Security (TLS) 1.3 as defined in RFC 8446. It lists TLS security properties provided by PSKs under certain assumptions, then it demonstrates how violations of these assumptions lead to attacks. Advice for applications to help meet these assumptions is provided. This document also discusses PSK use cases and provisioning processes. Finally, it lists the privacy and security properties that are not provided by TLS 1.3 when external PSKs are used.

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Table of Contents

- 1. [Introduction](#)
- 2. [Conventions and Definitions](#)
- 3. [Notation](#)
- 4. [PSK Security Properties](#)
 - 4.1. [Shared PSKs](#)
 - 4.2. [PSK Entropy](#)
- 5. [External PSKs in Practice](#)
 - 5.1. [Use Cases](#)
 - 5.2. [Provisioning Examples](#)
 - 5.3. [Provisioning Constraints](#)
- 6. [Recommendations for External PSK Usage](#)
 - 6.1. [Stack Interfaces](#)
 - 6.1.1. [PSK Identity Encoding and Comparison](#)
 - 6.1.2. [PSK Identity Collisions](#)
- 7. [Privacy Considerations](#)
- 8. [Security Considerations](#)
- 9. [IANA Considerations](#)
- 10. [References](#)
 - 10.1. [Normative References](#)
 - 10.2. [Informative References](#)
- [Acknowledgements](#)
- [Authors' Addresses](#)

1. Introduction

This document provides guidance on the use of external Pre-Shared Keys (PSKs) in Transport Layer Security (TLS) 1.3 [RFC8446]. This guidance also applies to Datagram TLS (DTLS) 1.3 [RFC9147] and Compact TLS 1.3 [CTLS]. For readability, this document uses the term "TLS" to refer to all such versions.

External PSKs are symmetric secret keys provided to the TLS protocol implementation as external inputs. External PSKs are provisioned out of band.

This document lists TLS security properties provided by PSKs under certain assumptions and demonstrates how violations of these assumptions lead to attacks. This document discusses PSK use cases, provisioning processes, and TLS stack implementation support in the context of these assumptions. This document also provides advice for applications in various use cases to help meet these assumptions.

There are many resources that provide guidance for password generation and verification aimed towards improving security. However, there is no such equivalent for external PSKs in TLS. This document aims to reduce that gap.

2. Conventions and Definitions

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "NOT RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in BCP 14 [RFC2119] [RFC8174] when, and only when, they appear in all capitals, as shown here.

3. Notation

For purposes of this document, a "logical node" is a computing presence that other parties can interact with via the TLS protocol. A logical node could potentially be realized with multiple physical instances operating under common administrative control, e.g., a server farm. An "endpoint" is a client or server participating in a connection.

4. PSK Security Properties

The use of a previously established PSK allows TLS nodes to authenticate the endpoint identities. It also offers other benefits, including resistance to attacks in the presence of quantum computers; see [Section 4.2](#) for related discussion. However, these keys do not provide privacy protection of endpoint identities, nor do they provide non-repudiation (one endpoint in a connection can deny the conversation); see [Section 7](#) for related discussion.

PSK authentication security implicitly assumes one fundamental property: each PSK is known to exactly one client and one server and they never switch roles. If this assumption is violated, then the security properties of TLS are severely weakened as discussed below.

4.1. Shared PSKs

As discussed in [Section 5.1](#), to demonstrate their attack, [\[AASS19\]](#) describes scenarios where multiple clients or multiple servers share a PSK. If this is done naively by having all members share a common key, then TLS authenticates only group membership, and the security of the overall system is inherently rather brittle. There are a number of obvious weaknesses here:

1. Any group member can impersonate any other group member.
2. If a PSK is combined with the result of a fresh ephemeral key exchange, then compromise of a group member that knows the resulting shared secret will enable the attacker to passively read traffic (and actively modify it).
3. If a PSK is not combined with the result of a fresh ephemeral key exchange, then compromise of any group member allows the attacker to passively read all traffic (and actively modify it), including past traffic.

Additionally, a malicious non-member can reroute handshakes between honest group members to connect them in unintended ways, as described below. Note that a partial mitigation for this class of attack is available: each group member includes the Server Name Indication (SNI) extension [\[RFC6066\]](#) and terminates the connection on mismatch between the presented SNI value and the receiving member's known identity. See [\[Selfie\]](#) for details.

To illustrate the rerouting attack, consider three peers, A, B, and C, who all know the PSK. The attack proceeds as follows:

1. A sends a `ClientHello` to B.
2. The attacker intercepts the message and redirects it to C.
3. C responds with a second flight (`ServerHello`, ...) to A.
4. A sends a `Finished` message to B. A has completed the handshake, ostensibly with B.
5. The attacker redirects the `Finished` message to C. C has completed the handshake with A.

In this attack, peer authentication is not provided. Also, if C supports a weaker set of ciphersuites than B, cryptographic algorithm downgrade attacks might be possible. This rerouting is a type of identity misbinding attack [\[Krawczyk\]](#) [\[Sethi\]](#). Selfie attack [\[Selfie\]](#) is a special case of the rerouting attack against a group member that can act as both a TLS server and a client. In the Selfie attack, a malicious non-member reroutes a connection from the client to the server on the same endpoint.

Finally, in addition to these weaknesses, sharing a PSK across nodes may negatively affect deployments. For example, revocation of individual group members is not possible without establishing a new PSK for all of the members that have not been revoked.

4.2. PSK Entropy

Entropy properties of external PSKs may also affect TLS security properties. For example, if a high-entropy PSK is used, then PSK-only key establishment modes provide expected security properties for TLS, including establishment of the same session keys between peers, secrecy of session keys, peer authentication, and downgrade protection. See [Appendix E.1](#) of [\[RFC8446\]](#) for an explanation of these properties. However, these modes lack forward security. Forward security may be achieved by using a PSK-DH mode or by using PSKs with short lifetimes.

In contrast, if a low-entropy PSK is used, then PSK-only key establishment modes are subject to passive exhaustive search attacks, which will reveal the traffic keys. PSK-DH modes are subject to active attacks in which the attacker impersonates one side. The exhaustive search phase of these attacks can be mounted offline if the attacker captures a single handshake using the PSK, but those attacks will not lead to compromise of the traffic keys for that connection because those also depend on the Diffie-Hellman (DH) exchange. Low-entropy keys are only secure against active attack if a Password-Authenticated Key Exchange (PAKE) is used with TLS. At the time of writing, the Crypto Forum Research Group (CFRG) is working on specifying recommended PAKEs (see [\[CPACE\]](#) and [\[OPAQUE\]](#) for the symmetric and asymmetric cases, respectively).

5. External PSKs in Practice

PSK ciphersuites were first specified for TLS in 2005. PSKs are now an integral part of the TLS 1.3 specification [\[RFC8446\]](#). TLS 1.3 also uses PSKs for session resumption. It distinguishes these resumption PSKs from external PSKs that have been provisioned out of band. This section describes known use cases and provisioning processes for external PSKs with TLS.

5.1. Use Cases

This section lists some example use cases where pairwise external PSKs (i.e., external PSKs that are shared between only one server and one client) have been used for authentication in TLS. There was no attempt to prioritize the examples in any particular order.

- Device-to-device communication with out-of-band synchronized keys. PSKs provisioned out of band for communicating with known identities, wherein the identity to use is discovered via a different online protocol.
- Intra-data-center communication. Machine-to-machine communication within a single data center or Point of Presence (PoP) may use externally provisioned PSKs; this is primarily for the purpose of supporting TLS connections with early data. See [Section 8](#) for considerations when using early data with external PSKs.
- Certificateless server-to-server communication. Machine-to-machine communication may use externally provisioned PSKs; this is primarily for the purposes of establishing TLS connections without requiring the overhead of provisioning and managing PKI certificates.
- Internet of Things (IoT) and devices with limited computational capabilities. [\[RFC7925\]](#) defines TLS and DTLS profiles for resource-constrained devices and suggests the use of PSK ciphersuites for compliant devices. The Open Mobile Alliance Lightweight Machine-to-

Machine (LwM2M) Technical Specification [LwM2M] states that LwM2M servers **MUST** support the PSK mode of DTLS.

- Securing RADIUS [RFC2865] with TLS. PSK ciphersuites are optional for this use case, as specified in [RFC6614].
- 3GPP server-to-user equipment authentication. The Generic Authentication Architecture (GAA) defined by 3GPP mentions that TLS PSK ciphersuites can be used between server and user equipment for authentication [GAA].
- Smart Cards. The German electronic Identity (eID) card supports authentication of a card holder to online services with TLS PSK [SmartCard].
- Quantum resistance. Some deployments may use PSKs (or combine them with certificate-based authentication as described in [RFC8773]) because of the protection they provide against quantum computers.

There are also use cases where PSKs are shared between more than two entities. Some examples below (as noted by Akhmetzyanova, et al. [AASS19]):

- Group chats. In this use case, group participants may be provisioned an external PSK out of band for establishing authenticated connections with other members of the group.
- IoT and devices with limited computational capabilities. Many PSK provisioning examples are possible in this use case. For example, in a given setting, IoT devices may all share the same PSK and use it to communicate with a central server (one key for n devices), have their own key for communicating with a central server (n keys for n devices), or have pairwise keys for communicating with each other (n^2 keys for n devices).

5.2. Provisioning Examples

The exact provisioning process depends on the system requirements and threat model. Whenever possible, avoid sharing a PSK between nodes; however, sharing a PSK among several nodes is sometimes unavoidable. When PSK sharing happens, other accommodations **SHOULD** be used as discussed in Section 6.

Examples of PSK provisioning processes are included below.

- Many industrial protocols assume that PSKs are distributed and assigned manually via one of the following approaches: (1) typing the PSK into the devices or (2) using a trust-on-first-use (TOFU) approach with a device completely unprotected before the first login took place. Many devices have a very limited UI. For example, they may only have a numeric keypad or even fewer buttons. When the TOFU approach is not suitable, entering the key would require typing it on a constrained UI.
- Some devices provision PSKs via an out-of-band, cloud-based syncing protocol.
- Some secrets may be baked into hardware or software device components. Moreover, when this is done at manufacturing time, secrets may be printed on labels or included in a Bill of Materials for ease of scanning or import.

5.3. Provisioning Constraints

PSK provisioning systems are often constrained in application-specific ways. For example, although one goal of provisioning is to ensure that each pair of nodes has a unique key pair, some systems do not want to distribute pairwise shared keys to achieve this. As another example, some systems require the provisioning process to embed application-specific information in either PSKs or their identities. Identities may sometimes need to be routable, as is currently under discussion for [EAP-TLS-PSK].

6. Recommendations for External PSK Usage

Recommended requirements for applications using external PSKs are as follows:

1. Each PSK **SHOULD** be derived from at least 128 bits of entropy, **MUST** be at least 128 bits long, and **SHOULD** be combined with an ephemeral key exchange, e.g., by using the "psk_dhe_ke" Pre-Shared Key Exchange Mode in TLS 1.3 for forward secrecy. As discussed in [Section 4](#), low-entropy PSKs (i.e., those derived from less than 128 bits of entropy) are subject to attack and **SHOULD** be avoided. If only low-entropy keys are available, then key establishment mechanisms such as PAKE that mitigate the risk of offline dictionary attacks **SHOULD** be employed. Note that no such mechanisms have yet been standardized, and further that these mechanisms will not necessarily follow the same architecture as the process for incorporating external PSKs described in [RFC9258].
2. Unless other accommodations are made to mitigate the risks of PSKs known to a group, each PSK **MUST** be restricted in its use to at most two logical nodes: one logical node in a TLS client role and one logical node in a TLS server role. (The two logical nodes **MAY** be the same, in different roles.) Two acceptable accommodations are described in [RFC9258]: (1) exchanging client and server identifiers over the TLS connection after the handshake and (2) incorporating identifiers for both the client and the server into the context string for an external PSK importer.
3. Nodes **SHOULD** use external PSK importers [RFC9258] when configuring PSKs for a client-server pair when applicable. Importers make provisioning external PSKs easier and less error-prone by deriving a unique, imported PSK from the external PSK for each key derivation function a node supports. See the Security Considerations of [RFC9258] for more information.
4. Where possible, the main PSK (that which is fed into the importer) **SHOULD** be deleted after the imported keys have been generated. This prevents an attacker from bootstrapping a compromise of one node into the ability to attack connections between any node; otherwise, the attacker can recover the main key and then re-run the importer itself.

6.1. Stack Interfaces

Most major TLS implementations support external PSKs. Stacks supporting external PSKs provide interfaces that applications may use when configuring PSKs for individual connections. Details about some existing stacks at the time of writing are below.

- **OpenSSL and BoringSSL:** Applications can specify support for external PSKs via distinct ciphersuites in TLS 1.2 and below. Also, they can then configure callbacks that are invoked for PSK selection during the handshake. These callbacks must provide a PSK identity and key. The exact format of the callback depends on the negotiated TLS protocol version, with new callback functions added specifically to OpenSSL for TLS 1.3 [RFC8446] PSK support. The PSK length is validated to be between 1-256 bytes (inclusive). The PSK identity may be up to 128 bytes long.
- **mbedTLS:** Client applications configure PSKs before creating a connection by providing the PSK identity and value inline. Servers must implement callbacks similar to that of OpenSSL. Both PSK identity and key lengths may be between 1-16 bytes long (inclusive).
- **gnutls:** Applications configure PSK values as either raw byte strings or hexadecimal strings. The PSK identity and key size are not validated.
- **wolfSSL:** Applications configure PSKs with callbacks similar to OpenSSL.

6.1.1. PSK Identity Encoding and Comparison

Section 5.1 of [RFC4279] mandates that the PSK identity should be first converted to a character string and then encoded to octets using UTF-8. This was done to avoid interoperability problems (especially when the identity is configured by human users). On the other hand, [RFC7925] advises implementations against assuming any structured format for PSK identities and recommends byte-by-byte comparison for any operation. When PSK identities are configured manually, it is important to be aware that visually identical strings may, in fact, differ due to encoding issues.

TLS 1.3 [RFC8446] follows the same practice of specifying the PSK identity as a sequence of opaque bytes (shown as `opaque identity<1..2^16-1>` in the specification) that thus is compared on a byte-by-byte basis. [RFC8446] also requires that the PSK identities are at least 1 byte and at the most 65535 bytes in length. Although [RFC8446] does not place strict requirements on the format of PSK identities, note that the format of PSK identities can vary depending on the deployment:

- The PSK identity **MAY** be a user-configured string when used in protocols like Extensible Authentication Protocol (EAP) [RFC3748]. For example, gnutls treats PSK identities as usernames.
- PSK identities **MAY** have a domain name suffix for roaming and federation. In applications and settings where the domain name suffix is privacy sensitive, this practice is **NOT RECOMMENDED**.
- Deployments should take care that the length of the PSK identity is sufficient to avoid collisions.

6.1.2. PSK Identity Collisions

It is possible, though unlikely, that an external PSK identity may clash with a resumption PSK identity. The TLS stack implementation and sequencing of PSK callbacks influences the application's behavior when identity collisions occur. When a server receives a PSK identity in a TLS 1.3 ClientHello, some TLS stacks execute the application's registered callback function before checking the stack's internal session resumption cache. This means that if a PSK identity collision occurs, the application's external PSK usage will typically take precedence over the internal session resumption path.

Because resumption PSK identities are assigned by the TLS stack implementation, it is **RECOMMENDED** that these identifiers be assigned in a manner that lets resumption PSKs be distinguished from external PSKs to avoid concerns with collisions altogether.

7. Privacy Considerations

PSK privacy properties are orthogonal to security properties described in [Section 4](#). TLS does little to keep PSK identity information private. For example, an adversary learns information about the external PSK or its identifier by virtue of the identifier appearing in cleartext in a ClientHello. As a result, a passive adversary can link two or more connections together that use the same external PSK on the wire. Depending on the PSK identity, a passive attacker may also be able to identify the device, person, or enterprise running the TLS client or TLS server. An active attacker can also use the PSK identity to suppress handshakes or application data from a specific device by blocking, delaying, or rate-limiting traffic. Techniques for mitigating these risks require further analysis and are out of scope for this document.

In addition to linkability in the network, external PSKs are intrinsically linkable by PSK receivers. Specifically, servers can link successive connections that use the same external PSK together. Preventing this type of linkability is out of scope.

8. Security Considerations

Security considerations are provided throughout this document. It bears repeating that there are concerns related to the use of external PSKs regarding proper identification of TLS 1.3 endpoints and additional risks when external PSKs are known to a group.

It is **NOT RECOMMENDED** to share the same PSK between more than one client and server. However, as discussed in [Section 5.1](#), there are application scenarios that may rely on sharing the same PSK among multiple nodes. [\[RFC9258\]](#) helps in mitigating rerouting and Selfie-style reflection attacks when the PSK is shared among multiple nodes. This is achieved by correctly using the node identifiers in the ImportedIdentity.context construct specified in [\[RFC9258\]](#). One solution would be for each endpoint to select one globally unique identifier to use in all PSK handshakes. The unique identifier can, for example, be one of its Media Access Control (MAC) addresses, a 32-byte random number, or its Universally Unique Identifier (UUID) [\[RFC4122\]](#). Note that such persistent, global identifiers have privacy implications; see [Section 7](#).

Each endpoint **SHOULD** know the identifier of the other endpoint with which it wants to connect and **SHOULD** compare it with the other endpoint's identifier used in `ImportedIdentity.context`. However, it is important to remember that endpoints sharing the same group PSK can always impersonate each other.

Considerations for external PSK usage extend beyond proper identification. When early data is used with an external PSK, the random value in the `ClientHello` is the only source of entropy that contributes to key diversity between sessions. As a result, when an external PSK is used more than one time, the random number source on the client has a significant role in the protection of the early data.

9. IANA Considerations

This document has no IANA actions.

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