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The Messaging Layer Security (MLS) Protocol

Abstract

Messaging applications are increasingly making use of end-to-end security mechanisms to ensure that messages are only accessible to the communicating endpoints, and not to any servers involved in delivering messages. Establishing keys providing such security in groups is challenging, however, for large groups, scalable and efficient mechanisms are required.

This document specifies the Messaging Layer Security (MLS) protocol that provides efficient asynchronous group key establishment with forward secrecy and post-compromise security for groups in size ranging from two to thousands.

Status of This Memo

This is an Internet Standards Track document.

This document is a product of the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF). It represents the consensus of the IETF community. It has received public review and has been approved for publication by the Internet Engineering Steering Group (IESG). Further information on Internet Standards is available in Section 2 of RFC 7841.

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1. Introduction

Messaging applications are increasingly making use of end-to-end security mechanisms to ensure that messages are only accessible to the communicating endpoints, and not to any servers involved in delivering messages. Establishing keys providing such security in groups is challenging, however, for large groups, scalable and efficient mechanisms are required.

Messaging Layer Security (MLS) provides efficient asynchronous group key establishment with forward secrecy (FS) and post-compromise security (PCS) for groups in size ranging from two to thousands. In addition to the base protocol, this document specifies recommended mechanisms for authenticating group members, including certification by an external service.

The base mechanism described in this document provides a group key establishment that has FS and PCS, but it does not provide other desirable properties such as transcript agreement or explicit membership authentication. Depending on the application requirements, it can be used directly, combined with other MLS mechanisms, or combined with application-layer mechanisms to provide these properties.

1.1. 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.

The following terms are used throughout this document:

- **Client**: An application participating in a group and capable of producing and consuming messages and updates to the group state.
- **Group**: A collection of clients that have shared cryptographic state.
- **Member**: A client that is in the group's roster.
- **Roster**: The list of members in a group.
- **Tree**: The ratchet tree used to represent the group's cryptographic state.
- **Epoch**: A period of time during which the group's cryptographic state is fixed.
- **Leaf**: A node in the ratchet tree.
- **Parent**: A node in the ratchet tree that is not a leaf.
- **Root**: The root node of the ratchet tree.
- **Direct path**: The list of nodes from a leaf to the root.
- **Copath**: The list of siblings of nodes in a direct path.
- **Resolution**: The list of non-blank nodes that cover a node.
- **Ciphersuite**: A specification of the cryptographic algorithms used in the group.
- **Key package**: A signed object describing a client's identity and capabilities.
- **Update**: A change to a client's leaf node.
- **Proposal**: A change to the group's state.
- **Commit**: A message that changes the group's state.
- **Welcome**: A message that provides a new member with the current state.
- **Application message**: A message that is not handshake.

2. Protocol Overview

MLS is a group key establishment protocol. Clients in the protocol maintain a shared cryptographic state that they can use to encrypt and authenticate messages to the group. Clients can add and remove themselves to and from the group, and update their own keys in the group. Each of these operations results in a new shared cryptographic state for the group.

The core of MLS is a ratchet tree (Section 5) that efficiently encodes a set of asymmetric key pairs, one per member of the group, along with a series of symmetric secrets used to encrypt and authenticate handshake messages (Section 8). The members of the group can use these secrets to encrypt and authenticate application messages (Section 10).

2.1. Ratchet Tree Overview

The ratchet tree is a data structure used to represent the group's cryptographic state. Each member of the group occupies a leaf of the tree, and holds the private key for their leaf. Each node in the tree (whether a leaf or a parent) is also populated with a public key, and the private key for each parent node is known to its children.

The root node of the tree is always the parent of its left and right children. Each of these children is the root of a subtree. To maintain the tree's structure, the number of leaves in the tree MUST always be a power of two. Clients that do not have a power of two number of members can fill out the tree with "blank" leaves.

The following diagram illustrates a ratchet tree for a group with seven members (A, B, C, D, E, F, G). Parent nodes are labeled P, and blank nodes are labeled with a dash.

```
                P
        P               P
    P       P       P       -
  A   B   C   D   E   F   G   -
```

Each node in the tree has a unique index. Leaf nodes are assigned indices in order from left to right, starting with 0. Parent nodes are also assigned indices in order, after their left children. The following diagram shows how nodes are assigned indices in a tree with seven members.

```
                3
        1               5
    0       2       4       -
  A   B   C   D   E   F   G   -
```

The ratchet tree is used to efficiently encrypt a message to a subset of the members of the group. The sender of the message chooses a resolution for each node in their direct path. The resolution of a node may contain zero, one, or more nodes. The sender encrypts the message to each node in the resolution.

For example, in the following diagram, if C wishes to send a message to B, D, E, F, and G, it would encrypt the message to the resolution of node 5, which consists of nodes 1 and 6.

```
                3
        1               5
    0       2       4       6
  A   B   C   D   E   F   G   -
```

2.2. Group Evolution

Over the lifetime of a group, its membership can change, and keys can be updated. Changes to the group are initiated by members of the group using Proposal messages. Proposals are then committed to by a Commit message, which causes the group to move to a new epoch.

Each epoch has a unique shared cryptographic state, which is derived from the shared state of the previous epoch. Clients can only send messages in a single epoch, and must update their state to the new epoch before they can send or process messages in the new epoch.

Proposals and Commits are sent as MLSPlaintext or MLSCiphertext messages (Section 7). These messages are authenticated over the group's current shared state, so that members of the group can verify that they belong to the group and have the same view of the group's state.

2.3. Cryptographic Objects

Clients' key packages contain the following cryptographic objects:

- **Credential**: A credential provides an identity for a client and binds that identity to a signature key.
- **Signature key**: A key pair used to sign messages.
- **Encryption key**: A key pair used to encrypt messages.

Credentials are used to authenticate messages at the MLS layer. Each credential includes a signature public key, and messages signed by the corresponding private key will be verified to authenticate them as coming from the client that owns the credential.

Credentials can also include information that is used to authenticate the client's identity to the application. For example, a credential might include a username or an email address. The MLS protocol does not specify how this information is used, but it is RECOMMENDED that applications specify how they will be used.

Clients MUST support at least one credential type, and MAY support more than one. Clients can indicate which credentials they support in their key packages.

2.4. Group Creation

The first step in creating a group is for the group creator to fetch key packages for the clients that will be initially invited to the group. The creator then creates a group with an initial group state that includes itself, and adds the invited clients to the group.

The creator of the group MUST choose a ciphersuite and initial value for the group's ratchet tree. The creator MUST also choose a unique group ID and a credential that will authenticate the creator's leaf in the tree.

2.5. Adding Members

Members can be added to a group by creating an Add proposal and committing it. The Add proposal specifies the key package of the client to be added. The client being added processes a Welcome message that provides it with the current state of the group after the Commit is applied.

2.6. Removing Members

Members can be removed from a group by creating a Remove proposal and committing it. The Remove proposal specifies the leaf in the tree of the client to be removed.

2.7. Updating Leaf Secrets

Members can update their leaf secrets by creating an Update proposal and committing it. The Update proposal specifies the new key package for the client's leaf.

2.8. Commit

Commit messages are sent to change the group's state. They contain a list of proposals that will be applied to the group state, and a path that updates the sender's leaf secrets.

2.9. Processing Messages

Clients process messages in the order they are received. They verify that the message is valid, and then update their state to the new epoch.

2.10. Application Messages

Application messages are sent to the group to convey application data. They are encrypted and authenticated using the group's shared state.

3. Basic Data Types

The following basic data types are used throughout this document.

```
opaque byte;
uint8 uint16[2];
uint8 uint32[4];
uint8 uint64[8];
```

3.1. Variable Vectors

Variable-length vectors are used to encode lists of values. The length of the vector is encoded in a variable-length prefix, and the values are encoded in order.

```
struct {
  T values[length];
} Vector;
```

3.2. Optional Values

Optional values are used to encode values that may or may not be present.

```
struct {
  T value;
} Optional;
```

3.3. Uniqueness Requirements

Some data structures require that their values be unique. For example, a group cannot have two members with the same signature key.

4. Cryptographic Objects

4.1. Cipher Suites

MLS ciphersuites specify the cryptographic algorithms used in the group. They include a key exchange algorithm, a signature algorithm, a hash function, and an AEAD algorithm.

4.2. Credentials

Credentials provide an identity for a client and bind that identity to a signature key.

4.3. Key Packages

Key packages are used to introduce clients to groups. They contain a credential and a public key for the client.

5. Ratchet Tree Operations

5.1. Ratchet Tree Nodes

Nodes in the ratchet tree can be blank or non-blank. Non-blank nodes contain a public key and a list of unmerged leaves.

5.2. Ratchet Tree Hashes

Each node in the tree has a hash that is computed from its contents and the hashes of its children.

5.3. Tree Updates

When a client updates its leaf secrets, it must also update the secrets of all nodes in its direct path.

5.4. Ratchet Tree Evolution

The ratchet tree evolves as members are added, removed, and updated.

5.5. Views of the Ratchet Tree

Different members of the group may have different views of the ratchet tree, depending on which updates they have processed.

5.6. Ratchet Tree Extensions

The ratchet tree can be extended with additional data.

6. Key Schedule

6.1. Group Context

The group context is a data structure that contains the group's shared state.

6.2. Epochs

Each epoch has a unique shared cryptographic state.

6.3. Pre-Shared Keys

Pre-shared keys can be used to inject additional entropy into the key schedule.

6.4. Secret Tree

The secret tree is used to derive keys for encrypting handshake messages.

6.5. Key Schedule Example

An example of the key schedule.

7. Message Framing

7.1. Content Types

MLS messages can contain different types of content.

7.2. Framing Structure

MLS messages are framed with a header and a body.

7.3. Message Protection

Handshake messages are protected with the group's shared state.

7.4. Message Protection Examples

Examples of message protection.

8. Group Evolution

8.1. Proposal Types

There are several types of proposals that can be made.

8.2. Proposal List Validation

Proposals must be validated before they are applied.

8.3. Proposal or Commit Rules

Rules for when proposals or commits are allowed.

8.4. Commit

Commit messages change the group's state.

8.5. Path Generation

When creating a commit, the sender must generate a path.

8.6. Path Processing

When processing a commit, the receiver must process the path.

8.7. Update Paths

Update paths are used to update leaf secrets.

8.8. External Commits

External commits allow clients to join a group without being invited.

9. Extensibility

9.1. Custom Proposal Types

Applications can define custom proposal types.

9.2. Custom Credential Types

Applications can define custom credential types.

9.3. Custom Extensions

Applications can define custom extensions.

10. Application Messages

Application messages are used to send application data to the group.

11. Group Creation

11.1. Required Capabilities

Groups can require that members support certain capabilities.

11.2. Adding Members Preemptively

Members can be added to a group before they join.

12. Sequencing of State Changes

12.1. Epoch Overlap

Clients may need to process messages from multiple epochs.

13. Security Considerations

13.1. Compromise Recovery (Post-Compromise Security)

MLS provides post-compromise security.

13.2. Forward Secrecy

MLS provides forward secrecy.

13.3. Group Management

Group management operations must be carefully authorized.

13.4. Membership Agreement

Members must agree on the group's membership.

13.5. Delivery Security

Delivery of messages must be secure.

13.6. Authentication

Authentication is provided by credentials.

13.7. Uniqueness of Signature Public Keys

Signature public keys must be unique in the group.

13.8. Parent Hash Validation

Parent hashes must be validated.

13.9. Key Derivation and Update Paths

Key derivation and update paths must be carefully implemented.

13.10. Cryptographic Analysis

The cryptographic analysis of MLS.

13.11. Implementation Considerations

Implementation considerations.

14. IANA Considerations

14.1. MLS Cipher Suites

IANA registry for MLS cipher suites.

14.2. MLS Extension Types

IANA registry for MLS extension types.

14.3. MLS Proposal Types

IANA registry for MLS proposal types.

14.4. MLS Credential Types

IANA registry for MLS credential types.

14.5. MLS Wire Formats

IANA registry for MLS wire formats.

14.6. MLS Content Types

IANA registry for MLS content types.

14.7. MLS Exporter Labels

IANA registry for MLS exporter labels.

14.8. MLS Error Types

IANA registry for MLS error types.

14.9. MLS Ciphersuite Values

IANA registry for MLS ciphersuite values.

15. References

15.1. Normative References

[RFC2119] Bradner, S., "Key words for use in RFCs to Indicate Requirement Levels", BCP 14, RFC 2119, March 1997.

[RFC8174] Leiba, B., "Ambiguity of Uppercase vs Lowercase in RFC 2119 Key Words", BCP 14, RFC 8174, May 2017.

15.2. Informative References

[RFC7841] Halpern, J., Ed., and S. Bradner, Ed., "RFC Streams, Headers, and Boilerplates", RFC 7841, May 2016.

Appendix A. Protocol Data Structures

This appendix contains the protocol data structures.

Appendix B. Message Protection Examples

This appendix contains examples of message protection.

Appendix C. Tree Math

This appendix contains tree math.

Appendix D. Array-Based Trees

This appendix contains array-based trees.

Appendix E. Parent Hash Example

This appendix contains a parent hash example.

Appendix F. Sample Schedule

This appendix contains a sample schedule.

Appendix G. Signature Schemes

This appendix contains signature schemes.

Appendix H. Implementation Considerations

This appendix contains implementation considerations.

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