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# RFC 9258

## Importing External Pre-Shared Keys (PSKs) for TLS 1.3

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### Abstract

This document describes an interface for importing external Pre-Shared Keys (PSKs) into TLS 1.3.

### Status of This Memo

This is an Internet Standards Track document.

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## 1. Introduction

TLS 1.3 [RFC8446] supports Pre-Shared Key (PSK) authentication, wherein PSKs can be established via session tickets from prior connections or via some external, out-of-band mechanism. The protocol mandates that each PSK only be used with a single hash function. This was done to simplify protocol analysis. TLS 1.2 [RFC5246], in contrast, has no such requirement, as a PSK may be used with any hash algorithm and the TLS 1.2 pseudorandom function (PRF). While there is no known way in which the same external PSK might produce related output in TLS 1.3 and prior versions, only limited analysis has been done. Applications **SHOULD** provision separate PSKs for (D)TLS 1.3 and prior versions. In cases where this is not possible (e.g., there are

already-deployed external PSKs or provisioning is otherwise limited), reusing external PSKs across different versions of TLS may produce related outputs, which may, in turn, lead to security problems; see [Appendix E.7](#) of [\[RFC8446\]](#).

To mitigate such problems, this document specifies a PSK importer interface by which external PSKs may be imported and subsequently bound to a specific key derivation function (KDF) and hash function for use in TLS 1.3 [\[RFC8446\]](#) and DTLS 1.3 [\[RFC9147\]](#). In particular, it describes a mechanism for importing PSKs derived from external PSKs by including the target KDF, (D)TLS protocol version, and an optional context string to ensure uniqueness. This process yields a set of candidate PSKs, each of which are bound to a target KDF and protocol, that are separate from those used in (D)TLS 1.2 and prior versions. This expands what would normally have been a single PSK and identity into a set of PSKs and identities.

## 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. Terminology

The following terms are used throughout this document:

**External PSK (EPSK):** A PSK established or provisioned out of band (i.e., not from a TLS connection) that is a tuple of (Base Key, External Identity, Hash).

**Base Key:** The secret value of an EPSK.

**External Identity:** A sequence of bytes used to identify an EPSK.

**Target protocol:** The protocol for which a PSK is imported for use.

**Target KDF:** The KDF for which a PSK is imported for use.

**Imported PSK (IPSK):** A TLS PSK derived from an EPSK, optional context string, target protocol, and target KDF.

**Non-imported PSK:** An EPSK that is used directly as a TLS PSK without being imported.

**Imported Identity:** A sequence of bytes used to identify an IPSK.

This document uses presentation language from [Section 3](#) of [\[RFC8446\]](#).

## 4. Overview

The PSK importer interface mirrors that of the TLS exporter interface (see [RFC8446]) in that it diversifies a key based on some contextual information. In contrast to the exporter interface, wherein output uniqueness is achieved via an explicit label and context string, the PSK importer interface defined herein takes an external PSK and identity and "imports" it into TLS, creating a set of "derived" PSKs and identities that are each unique. Each of these derived PSKs are bound to a target protocol, KDF identifier, and optional context string. Additionally, the resulting PSK binder keys are modified with a new derivation label to prevent confusion with non-imported PSKs. Through this interface, importing external PSKs with different identities yields distinct PSK binder keys.

Imported keys do not require negotiation for use since a client and server will not agree upon identities if imported incorrectly. Endpoints may incrementally deploy PSK importer support by offering non-imported PSKs for TLS versions prior to TLS 1.3. Non-imported and imported PSKs are not equivalent since their identities are different. See [Section 7](#) for more details.

Endpoints that import external keys **MUST NOT** use the keys that are input to the import process for any purpose other than the importer, and they **MUST NOT** use the derived keys for any purpose other than TLS PSKs. Moreover, each external PSK fed to the importer process **MUST** be associated with one hash function at most. This is analogous to the rules in [Section 4.2.11](#) of [RFC8446]. See [Section 8](#) for more discussion.

## 5. PSK Importer

This section describes the PSK importer interface and its underlying diversification mechanism and binder key computation modification.

### 5.1. External PSK Diversification

As input, the PSK importer interface takes an EPSK with External Identity `external_identity` and base key `epsk` (as defined in [Section 3](#)) along with an optional context. It then transforms the input into a set of PSKs and imported identities for use in a connection based on target protocols and KDFs. In particular, for each supported target protocol `target_protocol` and KDF `target_kdf`, the importer constructs an `ImportedIdentity` structure as follows:

```
struct {
    opaque external_identity<1...2^16-1>;
    opaque context<0..2^16-1>;
    uint16 target_protocol;
    uint16 target_kdf;
} ImportedIdentity;
```

The list of `ImportedIdentity.target_kdf` values is maintained by IANA as described in [Section 10](#). External PSKs **MUST NOT** be imported for (D)TLS 1.2 or prior versions. See [Section 7](#) for discussion on how imported PSKs for TLS 1.3 and non-imported PSKs for earlier versions coexist for incremental deployment.

`ImportedIdentity.context` **MUST** include the context used to determine the EPSK, if any exists. For example, `ImportedIdentity.context` may include information about peer roles or identities to mitigate Selfie-style reflection attacks [[Selfie](#)]. See [Appendix A](#) for more details. Since the EPSK is a key derived from an external protocol or sequence of protocols, `ImportedIdentity.context` **MUST** include a channel binding for the deriving protocols [[RFC5056](#)]. The details of this binding are protocol specific and out of scope for this document.

`ImportedIdentity.target_protocol` **MUST** be the (D)TLS protocol version for which the PSK is being imported. For example, TLS 1.3 [[RFC8446](#)] uses 0x0304, which will therefore also be used by QUICv1 [[QUIC](#)]. Note that this means the number of PSKs derived from an EPSK is a function of the number of target protocols.

Given an `ImportedIdentity` and corresponding EPSK with base key `epsk`, an imported PSK IPSK with base key `ipskx` is computed as follows:

```
epskx = HKDF-Extract(0, epsk)
ipskx = HKDF-Expand-Label(epskx, "derived psk",
                          Hash(ImportedIdentity), L)
```

`L` corresponds to the KDF output length of `ImportedIdentity.target_kdf` as defined in [Section 10](#). For hash-based KDFs, such as HKDF\_SHA256 (0x0001), this is the length of the hash function output, e.g., 32 octets for SHA256. This is required for the IPSK to be of length suitable for supported ciphersuites. Internally, HKDF-Expand-Label uses a label corresponding to `ImportedIdentity.target_protocol` (e.g., "tls13" for TLS 1.3, as per [Section 7.1](#) of [[RFC8446](#)] or "dtls13" for DTLS 1.3, as per [Section 5.10](#) of [[RFC9147](#)]).

The identity of `ipskx` as sent on the wire is `ImportedIdentity`, i.e., the serialized content of `ImportedIdentity` is used as the content of `PskIdentity.identity` in the PSK extension. The corresponding PSK input for the TLS 1.3 key schedule is "ipskx".

As the maximum size of the PSK extension is  $2^{16} - 1$  octets, an `Imported Identity` that exceeds this size is likely to cause a decoding error. Therefore, the PSK importer interface **SHOULD** reject any `ImportedIdentity` that exceeds this size.

The hash function used for HMAC-based Key Derivation Function (HKDF) [[RFC5869](#)] is that which is associated with the EPSK. It is not the hash function associated with `ImportedIdentity.target_kdf`. If the EPSK does not have such an associated hash function, SHA-256 [[SHA2](#)] **SHOULD** be used. Diversifying EPSK by `ImportedIdentity.target_kdf` ensures that an IPSK is only used as input keying material to one KDF at most, thus satisfying the requirements in [[RFC8446](#)]. See [Section 8](#) for more details.

Endpoints **SHOULD** generate a compatible `ipsex` for each target ciphersuite they offer. For example, importing a key for `TLS_AES_128_GCM_SHA256` and `TLS_AES_256_GCM_SHA384` would yield two PSKs: one for HKDF-SHA256 and another for HKDF-SHA384. In contrast, if `TLS_AES_128_GCM_SHA256` and `TLS_CHACHA20_POLY1305_SHA256` are supported, only one derived key is necessary. Each ciphersuite uniquely identifies the target KDF. Future specifications that change the way the KDF is negotiated will need to update this specification to make clear how target KDFs are determined for the import process.

EPSKs **MAY** be imported before the start of a connection if the target KDFs, protocols, and context string(s) are known a priori. EPSKs **MAY** also be imported for early data use if they are bound to the protocol settings and configuration that are required for sending early data. Minimally, this means that the Application-Layer Protocol Negotiation (ALPN) value [RFC7301], QUIC transport parameters (if used for QUIC), and any other relevant parameters that are negotiated for early data **MUST** be provisioned alongside these EPSKs.

## 5.2. Binder Key Derivation

To prevent confusion between imported and non-imported PSKs, imported PSKs change the PSK binder key derivation label. In particular, the standard TLS 1.3 PSK binder key computation is defined as follows:

```

      0
      |
      v
PSK -> HKDF-Extract = Early Secret
      |
      +-----> Derive-Secret(., "ext binder" | "res binder", "")
      |                                     = binder_key
      v

```

Imported PSKs use the string "imp binder" rather than "ext binder" or "res binder" when deriving `binder_key`. This means the binder key is computed as follows:

```

      0
      |
      v
PSK -> HKDF-Extract = Early Secret
      |
      +-----> Derive-Secret(., "ext binder"
      |                  | "res binder"
      |                  | "imp binder", "")
      |                                     = binder_key
      v

```

This new label ensures a client and server will negotiate use of an external PSK if and only if (a) both endpoints import the PSK or (b) neither endpoint imports the PSK. As `binder_key` is a leaf key, changing its computation does not affect any other key.

## 6. Deprecating Hash Functions

If a client or server wishes to deprecate a hash function and no longer use it for TLS 1.3, it removes the corresponding KDF from the set of target KDFs used for importing keys. This does not affect the KDF operation used to derive imported PSKs.

## 7. Incremental Deployment

In deployments that already have PSKs provisioned and in use with TLS 1.2, attempting to incrementally deploy the importer mechanism would result in concurrent use of the already-provisioned PSK directly as both a TLS 1.2 PSK and an EPSK, which, in turn, could mean that the same KDF and key would be used in two different protocol contexts. This is not a recommended configuration; see [Section 8](#) for more details. However, the benefits of using TLS 1.3 and PSK importers may prove sufficiently compelling that existing deployments choose to enable this noncompliant configuration for a brief transition period while new software (using TLS 1.3 and importers) is deployed. Operators are advised to make any such transition period as short as possible.

## 8. Security Considerations

The PSK importer security goals can be roughly stated as follows: avoid PSK reuse across KDFs while properly authenticating endpoints. When modeled as computational extractors, KDFs assume that input keying material (IKM) is sampled from some "source" probability distribution and that any two IKM values are chosen independently of each other [[Kraw10](#)]. This source-independence requirement implies that the same IKM value cannot be used for two different KDFs.

PSK-based authentication is functionally equivalent to session resumption in that a connection uses existing key material to authenticate both endpoints. Following the work of [[BAA15](#)], this is a form of compound authentication. Loosely speaking, compound authentication is the property that an execution of multiple authentication protocols, wherein at least one is uncompromised, jointly authenticates all protocols. Therefore, authenticating with an externally provisioned PSK should ideally authenticate both the TLS connection and the external provisioning process. Typically, the external provisioning process produces a PSK and corresponding context from which the PSK was derived and in which it should be used. If available, this is used as the `ImportedIdentity.context` value. We refer to an external PSK without such context as "context-free".

Thus, in considering the source-independence and compound authentication requirements, the PSK importer interface described in this document aims to achieve the following goals:

1. Externally provisioned PSKs imported into a TLS connection achieve compound authentication of the provisioning process and connection.
2. Context-free PSKs only achieve authentication within the context of a single connection.

3. Imported PSKs are not used as IKM for two different KDFs.
4. Imported PSKs do not collide with future protocol versions and KDFs.

There are no known related outputs or security issues caused from the process for computing imported PSKs from an external PSK and the processing of existing external PSKs used in (D)TLS 1.2 and below, as noted in [Section 7](#). However, only limited analysis has been done, which is an additional reason why applications **SHOULD** provision separate PSKs for (D)TLS 1.3 and prior versions, even when the importer interface is used in (D)TLS 1.3.

The PSK importer does not prevent applications from constructing non-importer PSK identities that collide with imported PSK identities.

## 9. Privacy Considerations

External PSK identities are commonly static by design so that endpoints may use them to look up keying material. As a result, for some systems and use cases, this identity may become a persistent tracking identifier.

Note also that `ImportedIdentity.context` is visible in cleartext on the wire as part of the PSK identity. Unless otherwise protected by a mechanism such as TLS Encrypted ClientHello [\[ECH\]](#), applications **SHOULD NOT** put sensitive information in this field.

## 10. IANA Considerations

IANA has created the "TLS KDF Identifiers" registry under the existing "Transport Layer Security (TLS) Parameters" registry.

The entries in the registry are as follows:

Value	KDF Description	Reference
0x0000	Reserved	RFC 9258
0x0001	HKDF_SHA256	<a href="#">[RFC5869]</a>
0x0002	HKDF_SHA384	<a href="#">[RFC5869]</a>

*Table 1: TLS KDF Identifiers Registry*

New target KDF values are allocated according to the following process:

- Values in the range 0x0000-0xfeff are assigned via Specification Required [\[RFC8126\]](#).
- Values in the range 0xff00-0xffff are reserved for Private Use [\[RFC8126\]](#).

The procedures for requesting values in the Specification Required space are specified in [Section 17](#) of [\[RFC8447\]](#).



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## Appendix A. Addressing Selfie

The Selfie attack [Selfie] relies on a misuse of the PSK interface. The PSK interface makes the implicit assumption that each PSK is known only to one client and one server. If multiple clients or multiple servers with distinct roles share a PSK, TLS only authenticates the entire group. A node successfully authenticates its peer as being in the group whether the peer is another node or itself. Note that this case can also occur when there are two nodes sharing a PSK without predetermined roles.

Applications that require authenticating finer-grained roles while still configuring a single shared PSK across all nodes can resolve this mismatch either by exchanging roles over the TLS connection after the handshake or by incorporating the roles of both the client and the server into the IPSK context string. For instance, if an application identifies each node by the Media Access Control (MAC) address, it could use the following context string.

```
struct {  
    opaque client_mac<0..2^8-1>;  
    opaque server_mac<0..2^8-1>;  
} Context;
```

If an attacker then redirects a ClientHello intended for one node to a different node, including the node that generated the ClientHello, the receiver will compute a different context string and the handshake will not complete.

Note that, in this scenario, there is still a single shared PSK across all nodes, so each node must be trusted not to impersonate another node's role.

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