



A Comprehensive Study of the Signal Handshake Protocol: Bundled Authenticated Key Exchange

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The Signal protocol

The Signal protocol powers messaging for billions of users:

- Signal app
- WhatsApp
- Google RCS
- Facebook Messenger

Relies on **handshake protocol** to set up **secure conversations**:

- X3DH (2016 – classically secure)
- PQXDH (2023 – HNDL secure)
- Fully Post-Quantum proposals: Bre+22; Col+24; Has+22

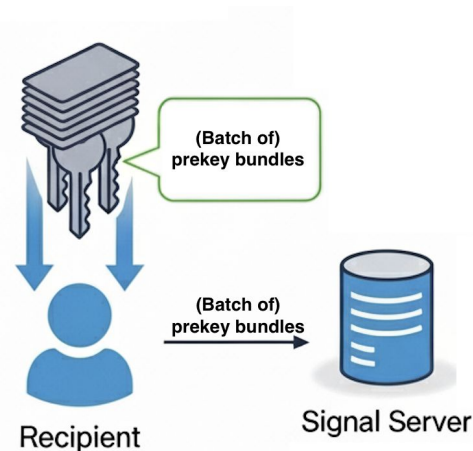
Choosing a fully PQ protocol requires comparing proposals.

Analyses use **ad-hoc models** tailored to individual protocols, making **comparisons difficult**.



Prekey Bundles: where tailored models fall short

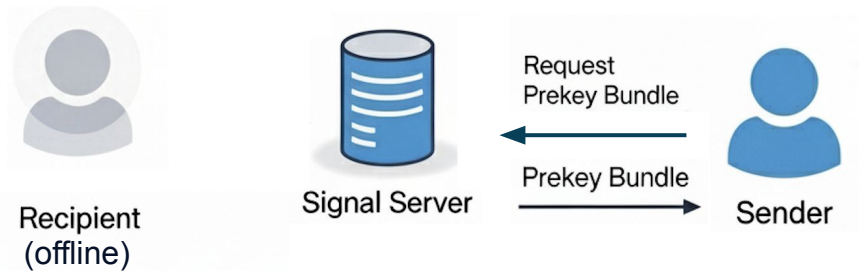
- Distinct component of Signal handshake protocols
- Users upload (batches of) key material onto the server





Prekey Bundles: where tailored models fall short

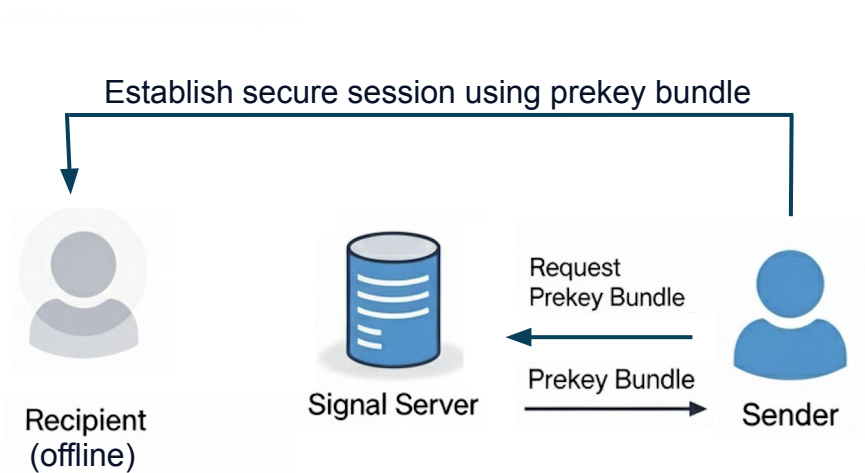
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- Senders can establish communication even when recipients are offline.





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Prekey Bundles: where tailored models fall short

Existing analyses of Signal handshake protocols (ad-hoc tailored models):

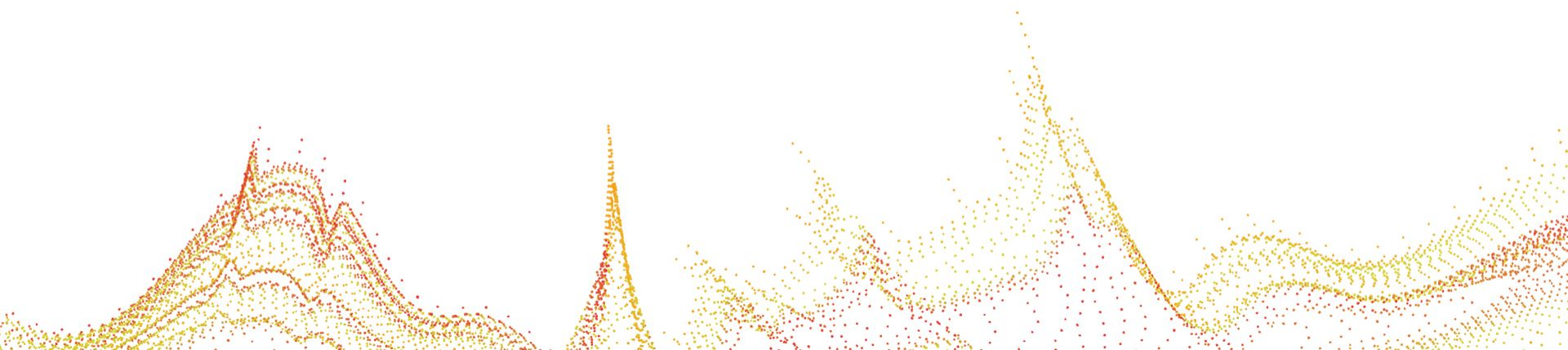
- Treat prekey bundles differently in each model
- Do not fully treat uploading of prekey bundles
- Don't capture all relevant adversaries
- Attained security **hard to compare**



Contributions: framework for Signal handshake protocols

- **Bundled AKE** protocols (**BAKE**)
 - Formally model **prekey bundles** and their **states**
 - **Unified framework** for Signal handshake protocols
 - Establish various levels of **security**
 - Framework for analyzing **deniability**
 - Novel metric → relaxed, pragmatic guarantees for deniability
- **RingXKEM**: new efficient PQ Signal handshake protocol
 - Not captured by previous models
 - From Ring Signatures
- **FalconRS**: compact, post-quantum, and **deniable** RS from Falcon
 - Novel metric for **deniability** of RSs

Bundled Authenticated Key Exchange (BAKE)





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Syntax

- $\text{BAKE.IDKeyGen}(1^\lambda) \rightarrow (\text{ik}, \text{isk})$ identity key generation algorithm
- $\text{BAKE.PreKeyBundleGen}(\text{isk}_u) \rightarrow (\text{prek}, \text{st}_u)$ prekey bundle generation algorithm
- $\text{BAKE.Send}(\text{isk}_s, \text{ik}_r, \text{prek}_{r,t}) \rightarrow (K, \rho)$ sender algorithm
- $\text{BAKE.Receive}(\text{isk}_r, \text{st}_r, \text{ik}_s, t, \rho) \rightarrow (K', \text{st}_r)$ (deterministic) receiver algorithm



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Single state for all uploaded prekey bundles



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Refreshes prekey bundles and state

Ensuring availability: last resort prekeys

Batch of prekey bundles contains:

- **One-time** prekey bundles ($\text{prek}_1, \text{prek}_2, \dots, \text{prek}_L$)
 - **Used once** – prekey bundle and associated state **deleted after use**
- A single **last resort** prekey bundle prek_\perp
 - **Used if one-time prekey bundles run out**
 - **Re-used** until the next call to `PreKeyBundleGen`

Consequence:

- Exchanges using **last-resort** prekey bundle are vulnerable to **state compromise**
 - even after the handshake completes
 - until the next call of `PreKeyBundleGen`

Correctness and Security of BAKE

Correctness

Users **honestly execute the BAKE protocol** → derive **identical session key**.

Security (game based)

- Extend **AKE** definitions to capture **(last-resort) prekey bundles**
- Model the security of a BAKE protocol via:
 - **Match soundness** game
 - Parties have a consistent view of who they are talking to
 - **Key indistinguishability** game
 - Established session keys look random to the adversary.

Deniability of BAKE: unified & modular framework

Setting:

- **Accuser** collects evidence relative to **accused user** which is provided to a **distinguisher**
- **Distinguisher** decides if evidence could have been simulated by the accuser

Modular framework:

- **Differentiate who provides information to the distinguisher** (accusers / accused)
- **Accuser capabilities : standard** (honest-but-curious) / **strong** (malicious)
- **Classical / quantum accuser and distinguisher**
- **Scopes:**
 - **Local** — accuser is sender or receiver
 - **Global** — both sender and receiver deny participation

Deniability of BAKE: pragmatic metric

Prior Work:

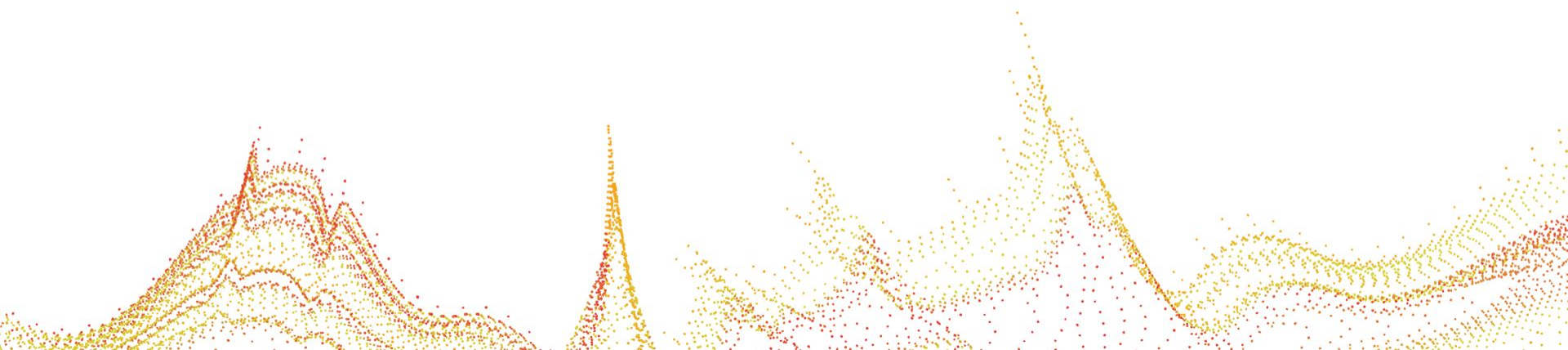
- Real & simulated evidence **indistinguishable by D**.
 - Statistical distance between distributions is close
 - Conservative (simulator outputs evidence **with same probability** as accused user)

Our approach:

- Accused user only needs to prove that **evidence could have been simulated**
- Inspired by differential privacy and differential indistinguishability
- **Distributions close** in terms of **hockey-stick divergence**

RingXKEM

new efficient
fully PQ Signal handshake protocol





RingXKEM: birds eye view

- Inspired by deniable AKE protocol by Hashimoto et al. [Has+21; Has+22]
 - ◆ Based on Ring Signatures (RS)
- Extended to BAKE syntax
- Optimization using Merkle trees:
 - ◆ ↘ Receiver bandwidth
 - ◆ ↘ Server storage

RingXKEM: without Merkle Tree Optimization

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15:   return  $\left( \vec{prek}_u := (prek_{u,t})_{t \in [L] \cup \{\perp\}}, \right.$ 
    $\left. st_u := (D_{\text{kem}}, rvk, D_{\rho_\perp}) \right)$ 

```

```

1: function RingXKEM.Send( $isk_s, ik_r, prek_r$ )
2:    $(dk_s, rsk_s) \leftarrow isk_s; (ek_r, rvk_r) \leftarrow ik_r$ 
3:    $(\widehat{ek}_r, \sigma_r, rvk) \leftarrow prek_r$ 
4:   require  $\llbracket \text{RS.Verify}(\{rvk_r\}, \widehat{ek}_r, \sigma_r) = 1 \rrbracket$ 
5:    $(ss_r, ct_r) \xleftarrow{\$} \text{KEM.Encaps}(ek_r)$ 
6:    $(\widehat{ss}_r, \widehat{ct}_r) \xleftarrow{\$} \text{KEM.Encaps}(\widehat{ek}_r)$ 
7:    $content := ik_s \parallel ik_r \parallel prek_r \parallel ct_r \parallel \widehat{ct}_r$ 
8:    $K \parallel K_{\text{ske}} \xleftarrow{\$} \text{KDF}(ss_r \parallel \widehat{ss}_r, content)$ 
9:    $\sigma \leftarrow \text{RS.Sign}(rsk_s, content, \{rvk_s, rvk\})$ 
10:   $ct_{\text{ske}} \xleftarrow{\$} \text{SKE.Enc}(K_{\text{ske}}, \sigma) \triangleright \text{Mask ring sig.}$ 
11:   $\rho := (ct_r, \widehat{ct}_r, ct_{\text{ske}})$ 
12:  return  $(K, \rho)$ 

```

RingXKEM: without Merkle Tree Optimization

```

1: function RingXKEM.IdKeyGen( $1^\lambda$ )
2:    $(ek, dk) \xleftarrow{\$} \text{KEM.KeyGen}(1^\lambda)$ 
3:    $(rvk, rsk) \xleftarrow{\$} \text{RS.KeyGen}(1^\lambda)$ 
4:   return  $(ik := (ek, rvk), isk := (dk, rsk))$ 

5: function RingXKEM.PreKeyBundleGen( $isk_u$ )
6:    $(dk_u, rsk_u) \leftarrow isk_u$ 
7:    $D_{\text{kem}}, D_{\rho_\perp} := \emptyset \triangleright \text{Initialize empty lists}$ 
8:   for  $t \in [L] \cup \{\perp\}$  do
9:      $(\widehat{ek}_{u,t}, \widehat{dk}_{u,t}) \xleftarrow{\$} \text{KEM.KeyGen}(1^\lambda)$ 
10:     $\sigma_{u,t} \xleftarrow{\$} \text{RS.Sign}(rsk_u, \widehat{ek}_{u,t}, \{rvk_u\})$ 
11:     $(rvk, \_) \xleftarrow{\$} \text{RS.KeyGen}(1^\lambda) \triangleright \text{Discard } rsk$ 
12:    for  $t \in [L] \cup \{\perp\}$  do  $\triangleright \text{One-time prekey bundles}$ 
13:       $prek_{u,t} := (\widehat{ek}_{u,t}, \sigma_{u,t}, rvk)$ 
14:       $D_{\text{kem}}[t] \leftarrow (prek_{u,t}, \widehat{dk}_{u,t})$ 
15:   return  $\left( \vec{prek}_u := (prek_{u,t})_{t \in [L] \cup \{\perp\}}, \right.$ 
    $\left. st_u := (D_{\text{kem}}, rvk, D_{\rho_\perp}) \right)$ 

```

```

1: function RingXKEM.Send( $isk_s, ik_r, prek_r$ )
2:    $(dk_s, rsk_s) \leftarrow isk_s; (ek_r, rvk_r) \leftarrow ik_r$ 
3:    $(\widehat{ek}_r, \sigma_r, rvk) \leftarrow prek_r$ 
4:   require  $\llbracket \text{RS.Verify}(\{rvk_r\}, \widehat{ek}_r, \sigma_r) = 1 \rrbracket$ 
5:    $(ss_r, ct_r) \xleftarrow{\$} \text{KEM.Encaps}(ek_r)$ 
6:    $(\widehat{ss}_r, \widehat{ct}_r) \xleftarrow{\$} \text{KEM.Encaps}(\widehat{ek}_r)$ 
7:    $content := ik_s || ik_r || prek_r || ct_r || \widehat{ct}_r$ 
8:    $K || K_{\text{ske}} := \text{KDF}(ss_r || \widehat{ss}_r, content)$ 
9:    $\sigma \xleftarrow{\$} \text{RS.Sign}(rsk_s, content, \{rvk_s, rvk\})$ 
10:   $ct_{\text{ske}} \xleftarrow{\$} \text{SKE.Enc}(K_{\text{ske}}, \sigma) \triangleright \text{Mask ring sig}$ 
11:   $\rho := (ct_r, \widehat{ct}_r, ct_{\text{ske}})$ 
12:  return  $(K, \rho)$ 

```

RingXKEM: without Merkle Tree Optimization

```

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7:    $D_{\text{kem}}, D_{\rho_\perp} := \emptyset \triangleright \text{Initialize empty lists}$ 
8:   for  $t \in [L] \cup \{\perp\}$  do
9:      $(\widehat{ek}_{u,t}, \widehat{dk}_{u,t}) \xleftarrow{\$} \text{KEM.KeyGen}(1^\lambda)$ 
10:     $\sigma_{u,t} \xleftarrow{\$} \text{RS.Sign}(rsk_u, \widehat{ek}_{u,t}, \{rvk_u\})$ 
11:     $(rvk, \_) \xleftarrow{\$} \text{RS.KeyGen}(1^\lambda) \triangleright \text{Discard } rsk$ 
12:    for  $t \in [L] \cup \{\perp\}$  do  $\triangleright \text{One-time prekey bundles}$ 
13:       $prek_{u,t} := (\widehat{ek}_{u,t}, \sigma_{u,t}, rvk)$ 
14:       $D_{\text{kem}}[t] \leftarrow (prek_{u,t}, \widehat{dk}_{u,t})$ 
15:   return  $\left( \vec{prek}_u := (prek_{u,t})_{t \in [L] \cup \{\perp\}}, \right.$   

    $\left. st_u := (D_{\text{kem}}, rvk, D_{\rho_\perp}) \right)$ 

```

```

1: function RingXKEM.Send( $isk_s, ik_r, prek_r$ )
2:    $(dk_s, rsk_s) \leftarrow isk_s; (ek_r, rvk_r) \leftarrow ik_r$ 
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5:    $(ss_r, ct_r) \xleftarrow{\$} \text{KEM.Encaps}(ek_r)$ 
6:    $(\widehat{ss}_r, \widehat{ct}_r) \xleftarrow{\$} \text{KEM.Encaps}(\widehat{ek}_r)$ 
7:    $content := ik_s || ik_r || prek_r || ct_r || \widehat{ct}_r$ 
8:    $K || K_{\text{ske}} := \text{KDF}(ss_r || \widehat{ss}_r, content)$ 
9:    $\sigma \xleftarrow{\$} \text{RS.Sign}(rsk_s, content, \{rvk_s, rvk\})$ 
10:   $ct_{\text{ske}} \xleftarrow{\$} \text{SKE.Enc}(K_{\text{ske}}, \sigma) \triangleright \text{Mask ring sig.}$ 
11:   $\rho := (ct_r, \widehat{ct}_r, ct_{\text{ske}})$ 
12:  return  $(K, \rho)$ 

```

RingXKEM: the Merkle Tree Optimization

```

5: function RingXKEM.PreKeyBundleGen(isku)
6:   (dku, rsku) ← isku
7:   Dkem, Dρ⊥ := ∅ ▷ Initialize empty lists
8:   for t ∈ [L] ∪ {⊥} do
9:     (eku,t, dk̂u,t) ← KEM.KeyGen(1λ)
10:    σu,t ← RS.Sign(rsku, ek̂u,t, {rvku})
11:    (rvk, _) ← RS.KeyGen(1λ) ▷ Discard rsk
12:    for t ∈ [L] ∪ {⊥} do
13:      preku,t := (eku,t, σu,t, rvk)
14:      Dkem[t] ← (preku,t, dk̂u,t)
15:   return (preku := (preku,t)t ∈ [L] ∪ {⊥},
           stu := (Dkem, rvk, Dρ⊥))

```

Observation

- Users upload $L + 1$ ring signatures to server
- PQ (ring) signatures are **big**
- Prekey bundles are **large**

RingXKEM: the Merkle Tree Optimization

```

5: function RingXKEM.PreKeyBundleGen(isku)
6:   (dku, rsku) ← isku
7:   Dkem, Dρ⊥ := ∅ ▷ Initialize empty lists
8:   for t ∈ [L] ∪ {⊥} do
9:     (eku,t, dku,t) ← KEM.KeyGen(1λ)
10:    ▷ Create and sign Merkle tree
11:    (rootu, treeu) ← MerkleTree((eku,t)t ∈ [L] ∪ {⊥})
12:    σu,root ← RS.Sign(rsku, rootu, {rvku})
13:    (rvk, _) ← RS.KeyGen(1λ) ▷ Discard rsk
14:    for t ∈ [L] do ▷ One-time prekey bundles
15:      pathu,t ← getMerklePath(treeu, t)
16:      preku,t := (eku,t, pathu,t, rootu, σu,root, rvk)
17:      Dkem[t] ← (preku,t, dku,t)
18:    ▷ Last-resort prekey bundle t = ⊥
19:    pathu,⊥ ← getMerklePath(treeu, L + 1)
20:    preku,⊥ := (eku,⊥, pathu,⊥, rootu, σu,root, rvk)
21:    Dkem[t] ← (preku,⊥, dku,⊥)
22:    return (preku := (preku,t)t ∈ [L] ∪ {⊥},
            stu := (Dkem, rvk, Dρ⊥))

```

Merkle tree optimization

→ Only **upload a single signature**

- ◆ accumulate KEM keys $(\widehat{ek}_{u,t})_{t \in [L] \cup \{\perp\}}$
- ◆ only sign digest root

RingXKEM: the Merkle Tree Optimization

```

5: function RingXKEM.PreKeyBundleGen(isku)
6:   (dku, rsku) ← isku
7:   Dkem, Dρ⊥ := ∅ ▷ Initialize empty lists
8:   for t ∈ [L] ∪ {⊥} do
9:     (eku,t, dku,t) ← KEM.KeyGen(1λ)
10:    ▷ Create and sign Merkle tree
11:    (rootu, treeu) ← MerkleTree((eku,t)t ∈ [L] ∪ {⊥})
12:    σu,root ← RS.Sign(rsku, rootu, {rvku})
13:    (rvk, _) ← RS.KeyGen(1λ) ▷ Discard rsk
14:    for t ∈ [L] do ▷ One-time prekey bundles
15:      [redacted]
16:      preku,t := (eku,t, [redacted] rootu, σu,root, rvk)
17:      Dkem[t] ← (preku,t, dku,t)
18:    ▷ Last-resort prekey bundle t = ⊥
19:    [redacted]
20:    preku,⊥ := (eku,⊥, [redacted] rootu, σu,root, rvk)
21:    Dkem[t] ← (preku,⊥, dku,⊥)
22:    return (preku := (preku,t)t ∈ [L] ∪ {⊥},
             stu := (Dkem, rvk, Dρ⊥))

```

Merkle tree optimization

→ Only **upload a single signature**

◆ accumulate KEM keys (ek_{u,t})_{t ∈ [L] ∪ {⊥}}

◆ only sign digest root

→ Server can compute **path** on the fly

◆ ↘ server storage

RingXKEM: Key Indistinguishability

Key Indistinguishability against quantum adversaries:

- If KDF is pseudorandom,
- KEM is IND-CCA secure,
- and **RS is unforgeable against quantum adversaries.**

RingXKEM: Deniability

sender's identity key

receiver's prekey bundle

- By properties of RS, $\sigma := \text{RS.Sign}(\text{rsk}_s, \text{content}, \{\text{rkv}_s, \widehat{\text{rvk}}_r\})$ in handshake message:
 - **Authenticates** the sender (to receiver), RS unforgeable
 - Does not reveal **which** key was used to sign RS anonymous
 - Either sender or receiver could have signed

RS anonymous against quantum adversaries → Accuser and Distinguisher can be quantum

RingXKEM: Comparison to X3DH / PQXDH

RingXKEM

- **Stronger security guarantees** than X3DH / PQXDH
- At least **as deniable as PQXDH** (for setting of concern to Signal)

Full post-quantum security

Requires RS **unforgeable and anonymous** against **quantum adversaries**.

PQ Ring Signatures: Instantiating RingXKEM

- Ideally from **standardized** PQ signatures
- 🙄 Inefficient
 - PQ + **anonymous** + compact : **difficult** to construct

Deniable Ring Signatures

Deniability: Weakening anonymity

- **Anonymity** : signatures produced using two secret keys are **indistinguishable**.
- New relaxation: **Deniability**
 - Signature gives no **hard evidence** about which key was used to sign

Design deniable PQ RS schemes for small ring sizes

- From **Standardized Falcon [Pre+22, GJK24b]** – FalconRS
- From MAYO [Beu+24] – MayoRS

Deniable PQ Ring Signatures: FalconRS and MayoRS

Scheme	PK	2-RSig	Negligible anonymity
FalconRS (from Falcon-512)	897 B	1288 B	×
MayoRS ₁ (from MAYO ₁)	1168 B	650 B	×
MayoRS ₂ (from MAYO ₂)	5488 B	368 B	×
Gandalf [GJK24b]	896 B	1236 B	×
Raptor [LAZ19b]	900 B	2532 B	×
Calamari [BKP20]	64 B	3662 B	✓
DualRing-LB [Yue+21]	2496 B	3877 B	✓
Falafel [BKP20]	4096 B	30 016 B	✓

Scheme	Keygen	Sign 2-ring	Verify 2-ring
Falcon-512	6.2 Mc	0.74 Mc	0.04 Mc
MAYO ₁	0.24 Mc	1.1 Mc	0.28 Mc
MAYO ₂	0.65 Mc	1.5 Mc	0.16 Mc
Raptor	27.1 Mc	5 Mc	2 Mc
Calamari	119.5 Mc	46 581 Mc	41 250 Mc
Falafel	0.1 Mc	163 Mc	76 Mc

FalconRS:

- From **standardized Falcon**
- **Compact** + implementations **outperforming prior work**



Ongoing / Future work

Collaboration with Felix Günther¹, Vadim Lyubashevsky¹, and Rolfe Schmidt²

- Designing fully PQ handshake protocol for Signal
- Space/bandwidth optimizations for Falcon-based signatures and RSs
- Considering the use of RingXKEM for the next fully PQ Signal protocol

Other applications of RS where deniability is sufficient?

- Use *efficient & compact* FalconRS based on *standardized* Falcon

1. IBM Research Europe, Zurich
2. Signal Messenger

Full versions



“Bundled Authenticated Key Exchange: A Concrete Treatment of (Post-Quantum) Signal’s Handshake Protocol.”
By Hashimoto, Katsumata, and Wiggers.
In: USENIX Security 2025
eprint.iacr.org/2025/040



“Comprehensive Deniability Analysis of Signal Handshake Protocols: X3DH, PQXDH to Fully Post-Quantum with Deniable Ring Signatures.” By Katsumata, Niot, Tucker, Wiggers.
In: USENIX Security 2025
eprint.iacr.org/2025/1090