

**Intermediate Exchange in the IKEv2 Protocol**  
**draft-ietf-ipsecme-ikev2-intermediate-01**

Abstract

This document defines a new exchange, called Intermediate Exchange, for the Internet Key Exchange protocol Version 2 (IKEv2). This exchange can be used for transferring large amount of data in the process of IKEv2 Security Association (SA) establishment. Introducing Intermediate Exchange allows re-using existing IKE Fragmentation mechanism, that helps to avoid IP fragmentation of large IKE messages, but cannot be used in the initial IKEv2 exchange.

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## 1. Introduction

The Internet Key Exchange protocol version 2 (IKEv2) defined in [\[RFC7296\]](#) uses UDP as a transport for its messages. If size of the messages is large enough, IP fragmentation takes place, that may interfere badly with some network devices. The problem is described in more detail in [\[RFC7383\]](#), which also defines an extension to the IKEv2 called IKE Fragmentation. This extension allows IKE messages to be fragmented at IKE level, eliminating possible issues caused by IP fragmentation. However, the IKE Fragmentation cannot be used in the initial IKEv2 exchange (IKE\_SA\_INIT). This limitation in most cases is not a problem, since the IKE\_SA\_INIT messages used to be small enough not to cause IP fragmentation.

However, the situation has been changing recently. One example of the need to transfer large amount of data before IKE SA is created is using Quantum Computer resistant key exchange methods in IKEv2. Recent progress in Quantum Computing has brought a concern that classical Diffie-Hellman key exchange methods will become insecure in a relatively near future and should be replaced with Quantum Computer (QC) resistant ones. Currently most of QC-resistant key exchange methods have large public keys. If these keys are exchanged in the IKE\_SA\_INIT, then most probably IP fragmentation will take place, therefore all the problems caused by it will become inevitable.

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A possible solution to the problem would be to use TCP as a transport for IKEv2, as defined in [[RFC8229](#)]. However this approach has significant drawbacks and is intended to be a "last resort" when UDP transport is completely blocked by intermediate network devices.

This specification describes a way to transfer large amount of data in IKEv2 using UDP transport. For this purpose the document defines a new exchange for the IKEv2 protocol, called Intermediate Exchange or IKE\_INTERMEDIATE. One or more these exchanges may take place right after the IKE\_SA\_INIT exchange and prior to the IKE\_AUTH exchange. The IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange messages can be fragmented using IKE Fragmentation mechanism, so these exchanges may be used to transfer large amounts of data which don't fit into the IKE\_SA\_INIT exchange without causing IP fragmentation.

The Intermediate Exchange can be used to transfer large public keys of QC-resistant key exchange methods, but its application is not limited to this use case. This exchange can also be used whenever some data need to be transferred before the IKE\_AUTH exchange and for some reason the IKE\_SA\_INIT exchange is not suited for this purpose. This document defines the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange without tying it to any specific use case. It is expected that separate specifications will define for which purposes and how the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange is used in the IKEv2.

## **2. Terminology and Notation**

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. Intermediate Exchange Details**

### **3.1. Support for Intermediate Exchange Negotiation**

The initiator indicates its support for Intermediate Exchange by including a notification of type INTERMEDIATE\_EXCHANGE\_SUPPORTED in the IKE\_SA\_INIT request message. If the responder also supports this exchange, it includes this notification in the response message.

Initiator	Responder
-----	-----
HDR, SAI1, KEi, Ni,	
[N(INTERMEDIATE_EXCHANGE_SUPPORTED)] -->	
	<-- HDR, SAR1, KEr, Nr, [CERTREQ],
	[N(INTERMEDIATE_EXCHANGE_SUPPORTED)]

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The `INTERMEDIATE_EXCHANGE_SUPPORTED` is a Status Type IKEv2 notification. Its Notify Message Type is <TBA by IANA>. Protocol ID and SPI Size are both set to 0. This specification doesn't define any data this notification may contain, so the Notification Data is left empty. However, future enhancements of this specification may override this. Implementations **MUST** ignore the non-empty Notification Data if they don't understand its purpose.

### **3.2. Using Intermediate Exchange**

If both peers indicated their support for the Intermediate Exchange, the initiator may use one or more these exchanges to transfer additional data. Using the `IKE_INTERMEDIATE` exchange is optional, the initiator may find it unnecessary after completing the `IKE_SA_INIT` exchange.

The Intermediate Exchange is denoted as `IKE_INTERMEDIATE`, its Exchange Type is <TBA by IANA>.

Initiator	Responder
-----	-----
HDR, ..., SK {...} -->	<-- HDR, ..., SK {...}

The initiator may use several `IKE_INTERMEDIATE` exchanges if necessary. Since initiator's Window Size is initially set to one ([Section 2.3 of \[RFC7296\]](#)), these exchanges **MUST** follow each other and **MUST** all be completed before the `IKE_AUTH` exchange is initiated. The `IKE SA` **MUST NOT** be considered as established until the `IKE_AUTH` exchange is successfully completed.

The Message IDs for the `IKE_INTERMEDIATE` exchanges **MUST** be chosen according to the standard IKEv2 rule, described in the [Section 2.2. of \[RFC7296\]](#), i.e. it is set to 1 for the first `IKE_INTERMEDIATE` exchange, 2 for the next (if any) and so on. The message ID for the first pair of the `IKE_AUTH` messages is one more than the one that was used in the last `IKE_INTERMEDIATE` exchange.

If the presence of NAT is detected in the `IKE_SA_INIT` exchange via `NAT_DETECTION_SOURCE_IP` and `NAT_DETECTION_DESTINATION_IP` notifications, then the peers **MUST** switch to port 4500 immediately once this exchange is completed, i.e. in the first `IKE_INTERMEDIATE` exchange.

The content of the `IKE_INTERMEDIATE` exchange messages depends on the data being transferred and will be defined by specifications utilizing this exchange. However, since the main motivation for the `IKE_INTERMEDIATE` exchange is to avoid IP fragmentation when large

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amount of data need to be transferred prior to IKE\_AUTH, the Encrypted payload MUST be present in the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange messages and payloads containing large data MUST be placed inside. This will allow IKE Fragmentation [[RFC7383](#)] to take place, provided it is supported by the peers and negotiated in the initial exchange.

### **3.3. The IKE\_INTERMEDIATE Exchange Protection and Authentication**

#### **3.3.1. Protection of the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE Messages**

The keys SK\_e[i/r] and SK\_a[i/r] for the Encrypted payload in the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchanges are computed in a standard fashion, as defined in the [Section 2.14 of \[RFC7296\]](#). Every subsequent IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange uses the most recently calculated IKE SA keys before this exchange is started. So, the first IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange always uses SK\_e[i/r] and SK\_a[i/r] keys that were computed as a result of the IKE\_SA\_INIT exchange. If the first IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange performs additional key exchange resulting in the update of SK\_e[i/r] and SK\_a[i/r], then these updated keys are used for encryption and authentication of the next IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange, otherwise the current keys are used, and so on.

#### **3.3.2. Authentication of the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE Exchanges**

The content of the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchanges must be authenticated in the IKE\_AUTH exchange. For this purpose the definition of the blob to be signed (or MAC'ed) from the [Section 2.15 of \[RFC7296\]](#) is modified as follows:

```
InitiatorSignedOctets = RealMsg1 | NonceRData | MACedIDForI [| IntAuth]
ResponderSignedOctets = RealMsg2 | NonceIDData | MACedIDForR [| IntAuth]
```

```
IntAuth = IntAuth_1 | [| IntAuth_2 [| IntAuth_3]] ...
```

```
IntAuth_1 = IntAuth_1_I | IntAuth_1_R
IntAuth_2 = IntAuth_2_I | IntAuth_2_R
IntAuth_3 = IntAuth_3_I | IntAuth_3_R
...
```

```
IntAuth_1_I = prf(SK_pi_1, [IntAuth_1_I_P |] IntAuth_1_I_A)
IntAuth_2_I = prf(SK_pi_2, [IntAuth_2_I_P |] IntAuth_2_I_A)
IntAuth_3_I = prf(SK_pi_3, [IntAuth_3_I_P |] IntAuth_3_I_A)
...
```

```
IntAuth_1_R = prf(SK_pr_1, [IntAuth_1_R_P |] IntAuth_1_R_A)
IntAuth_2_R = prf(SK_pr_2, [IntAuth_2_R_P |] IntAuth_2_R_A)
IntAuth_3_R = prf(SK_pr_3, [IntAuth_3_R_P |] IntAuth_3_R_A)
...
```





IntAuth\_1\_I/IntAuth\_1\_R, IntAuth\_2\_I/IntAuth\_2\_R, IntAuth\_3\_I/IntAuth\_3\_R, etc. represent the results of applying the negotiated prf to the content of the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE messages sent by the initiator (IntAuth\*\_I) and by the responder (IntAuth\*\_R) in an order of increasing Message IDs (i.e. in an order the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchanges took place). The prf is applied to the two chunks of data: optional IntAuth\*\_ [I/R]\_P and mandatory IntAuth\*\_ [I/R]\_A. The IntAuth\*\_ [I/R]\_A chunk lasts from the first octet of the IKE Header (not including prepended four octets of zeros, if port 4500 is used) to the last octet of the Encrypted Payload header. The IntAuth\*\_ [I/R]\_P chunk is present if the Encrypted payload is not empty. It consists of the not yet encrypted content of the Encrypted payload, excluding Initialization Vector, Padding, Pad Length and Integrity Checksum Data fields (see 3.14 of [\[RFC7296\]](#) for description of the Encrypted payload). In other words, the IntAuth\*\_ [I/R]\_P chunk is the inner payloads of the Encrypted payload in plaintext form.





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the corresponded IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange is started. The first IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange always uses SK\_p[i/r] keys that were computed in the IKE\_SA\_INIT as SK\_p[i/r]\_1. If the first IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange performs additional key exchange resulting in SK\_p[i/r] update, then this updated SK\_p[i/r] are used as SK\_p[i/r]\_2, otherwise the original SK\_p[i/r] are used, and so on. Note, that if keys are updated then for any given IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange the keys SK\_e[i/r] and SK\_a[i/r] used for its messages protection (see [Section 3.3.1](#)) and the keys SK\_p[i/r] for its authentication are always from the same generation.

### **3.4. Error Handling in the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE Exchange**

Since messages of the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange are not authenticated until the IKE\_AUTH exchange successfully completes, possible errors need to be handled with care. There is a trade-off between providing a better diagnostics of the problem and a risk to become a part of DoS attack. See [Section 2.21.1](#) and 2.21.2 of [\[RFC7296\]](#) describe how errors are handled in initial IKEv2 exchanges, these considerations are also applied to the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange.

## **4. Interaction with other IKEv2 Extensions**

The IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchanges MAY be used during the IKEv2 Session Resumption [\[RFC5723\]](#) between the IKE\_SESSION\_RESUME and the IKE\_AUTH exchanges. To be able to use it peers MUST negotiate support for intermediate exchange by including INTERMEDIATE\_EXCHANGE\_SUPPORTED notifications in the IKE\_SESSION\_RESUME messages. Note, that a flag whether peers supported the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange is not stored in the resumption ticket and is determined each time from the IKE\_SESSION\_RESUME exchange.

## **5. Security Considerations**

The data that is transferred by means of the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchanges is not authenticated until the subsequent IKE\_AUTH exchange is completed. However, if the data is placed inside the Encrypted payload, then it is protected from passive eavesdroppers. In addition the peers can be certain that they receives messages from the party he/she performed the IKE\_SA\_INIT with if they can successfully verify the Integrity Checksum Data of the Encrypted payload.

The main application for Intermediate Exchange is to transfer large amount of data before IKE SA is set up without causing IP fragmentation. For that reason it is expected that in most cases IKE Fragmentation will be employed in the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchanges.



[Section 5 of \[RFC7383\]](#) contains security considerations for IKE Fragmentation.

Note, that if an attacker was able to break key exchange in real time (e.g. by means of Quantum Computer), then the security of the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange would degrade. In particular, such an attacker would be able both to read data contained in the Encrypted payload and to forge it. The forgery would become evident in the IKE\_AUTH exchange (provided the attacker cannot break employed authentication mechanism), but the ability to inject forged the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange messages with valid ICV would allow the attacker to mount Denial-of-Service attack. Moreover, if in this situation the negotiated prf was not secure against preimage attack with known key, then the attacker could forge the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange messages without later being detected in the IKE\_AUTH exchange. To do this the attacker should find the same IntAuth\_\*\_[I|R] value for the forged message as for original.

## 6. IANA Considerations

This document defines a new Exchange Type in the "IKEv2 Exchange Types" registry:

<TBA>           IKE\_INTERMEDIATE

This document also defines a new Notify Message Types in the "Notify Message Types - Status Types" registry:

<TBA>           INTERMEDIATE\_EXCHANGE\_SUPPORTED

## 7. Acknowledgements

The idea to use an intermediate exchange between IKE\_SA\_INIT and IKE\_AUTH was first suggested by Tero Kivinen. Scott Fluhrer and Daniel Van Geest identified a possible problem with authentication of the IKE\_INTERMEDIATE exchange and helped to resolve it.

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