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**E-mail Authentication for Internationalized Mail  
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Abstract

SPF, DKIM, and DMARC enable a domain owner to publish e-mail authentication and policy information in the DNS. In internationalized e-mail, domain names can occur both as U-labels and A-labels. The Authentication-Results header reports the result of authentication checks made with SPF, DKIM, DMARC, and other schemes. This specification clarifies when to use which form of domain names when using SPF, DKIM, and DMARC and when creating Authentication-Results headers.

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## [1.](#) Introduction

SPF, DKIM, and DMARC enable a domain owner to publish e-mail authentication and policy information in the DNS. SPF primarily publishes information about what host addresses are authorized to send mail for a domain. DKIM places cryptographic signatures on e-mail messages, with the validation keys published in the DNS. DMARC publishes policy information related to the domain in the From: header of e-mail messages.

In conventional e-mail, all domain names are ASCII in all contexts so there is no question about the representation of the domain names. All internationalized domain names are represented as A-labels [[RFC5890](#)] in unencoded message bodies, in SMTP sessions, and in the DNS. Internationalized mail [[RFC6530](#)] allows U-labels in SMTP sessions [[RFC6531](#)] and in message headers [[RFC6532](#)].

Every U-label is equivalent to an A-label, so in principle the choice of label format should not cause any ambiguities. But in practice, consistent use of label formats will make it more likely that mail senders' and receivers' code interoperates.

Internationalized mail also allows arbitrary UTF-8 strings in the local parts of mailbox names, which were historically arbitrary ASCII.



## **2. Definitions**

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" when written in upper case in in this document are to be interpreted as described in [[RFC2119](#)].

The term IDN, for Internationalized Domain Name, refers to either a U-label or an A-label.

Since DMARC is not currently a standards track protocol, this specification offers advice rather than requirements for DMARC.

## **3. General principles**

In headers in EAI mail messages, domain names that were restricted to ASCII can now be U-labels, and mailbox local parts can be UTF-8. Header names and other text intended primarily to be interpreted by computers rather than read by people remains ASCII.

Strings stored in DNS records remain ASCII since there is no way to tell whether a client retrieving a DNS record expects an EAI or an ASCII result. When a domain name found in a mail header includes U-labels, those labels are translated to A-labels before being looked up in the DNS, as described in [[RFC5891](#)].

## **4. SPF and internationalized mail**

SPF [[RFC7208](#)] uses two identities from the SMTP session, the host name in the EHLO command, and the domain in the address in the MAIL FROM command. Since the EHLO command precedes the server response that tells whether the server supports the SMTPUTF8 extension, an IDN domain name argument MUST be represented as an A-label. An IDN domain name in MAIL FROM can be either U-labels or an A-labels.

All U-labels MUST be converted to A-labels before being used for an SPF validation. This includes both the original DNS lookup, described in [Section 3 of \[RFC7208\]](#) and the macro expansion of domain-spec described in [section 7. Section 4.3 of \[RFC7208\]](#) states that all IDNs in an SPF DNS record MUST be A-labels; this rule is unchanged since any SPF record can be used to authorize either EAI or conventional mail.

SPF macros %s and %l expand the local-part of the sender's mailbox. If the local-part contains non-ASCII characters, terms that include %s or %l do not match anything.



## **5. DKIM and internationalized mail**

DKIM [[RFC6376](#)] specifies a message header that contains a cryptographic message signature and a DNS record that contains the validation key.

[Section 3.5 of \[RFC6376\]](#) states that IDNs in the d=, i=, and s= tags of a DKIM-Signature header MUST be encoded as A-labels. This rule is relaxed only for headers in internationalized messages [[RFC6532](#)] so IDNs MAY be represented either as A-labels or U-labels. This provides improved consistency with other headers. The set of allowable characters in the local-part of an i= tag is extended as described in [[RFC6532](#)]. When computing or verifying the hash in a DKIM signature as described in [section 3.7](#), the hash MUST use the domain name in the format it occurs in the header.

DKIM key records, described in [section 3.6.1](#), do not contain domain names, so there is no change to their specification.

## **6. DMARC and internationalized mail**

DMARC [[RFC7489](#)] defines a policy language that domain owners can specify for the domain of the address in a [RFC5322](#).From header.

[Section 6.6.1](#) specifies, somewhat imprecisely, how IDNs in the [RFC5322](#).From address domain are to be handled. That section is updated to say that all U-labels in the domain are converted to A-labels before further processing. Sections [6.7](#) and [7.1](#) are similarly updated to say that all U-labels in domains being handled are converted to A-labels before further processing.

DMARC policy records, described in [section 6.3](#), can contain e-mail addresses in the rua and ruf tags. Since a policy record can be used for both internationalized and conventional mail, those addresses still have to be conventional addresses, not internationalized addresses.

## **7. IANA Considerations**

This document makes no request of IANA.

## **8. Security Considerations**

E-mail is subject to a vast range of threats and abuses. This document attempts to slightly mitigate some of them but does not, as far as the author knows, add any new ones.



## 9. Normative References

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## **Appendix A. Change history**

03 to 04 Take out Authentication-Results, now handled elsewhere.

02 to 03 SPF local-part macros don't match non-ASCII. Add S/MIME auth results.

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