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Authors: J. Peterson

Neustar

Short-Lived Certificates for Secure Telephone Identity

Abstract

When certificates are used as credentials to attest the assignment of ownership of telephone numbers, some mechanism is required to provide certificate freshness. This document specifies short-lived certificates as a means of guaranteeing certificate freshness for secure telephone identity (STIR), potentially relying on the Automated Certificate Management Environment (ACME) or similar mechanisms to allow signers to acquire certificates as needed.

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Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Terminology](#)
- [3. Short-lived certificates for STIR](#)
- [4. Certificate conveyance with 'x5c'](#)
- [5. Certificate Acquisition with ACME](#)
- [6. IANA Considerations](#)
- [7. Privacy Considerations](#)
- [8. Security Considerations](#)
- [9. Acknowledgments](#)
- [10. References](#)
 - [10.1. Normative References](#)
 - [10.2. Informative References](#)
- [Author's Address](#)

1. Introduction

The [STIR problem statement](#) [RFC7340] discusses many attacks on the telephone network that are enabled by impersonation, including various forms of robocalling, voicemail hacking, and swatting. One of the most important components of a system to prevent impersonation is the implementation of credentials which identify the parties who control telephone numbers. The [STIR certificates](#) [RFC8226] specification describes a credential system based on [X.509] version 3 certificates in accordance with [RFC5280] for that purpose. Those credentials can then be used by STIR authentication services [RFC8224] to sign PASSport objects [RFC8225] carried in a SIP [RFC3261] request.

The STIR certificates document specifies an extension to X.509 that defines a Telephony Number (TN) Authorization List that may be included by certificate authorities in certificates. This extension provides additional information that relying parties can use when validating transactions with the certificate: either in the form of Service Provider Codes (SPCs) or telephone numbers. Telephone numbers or number ranges are used in delegate STIR certificates [RFC9060]. When a SIP request arrives at a terminating administrative domain, for example, the calling number attested by the SIP request can be compared to the TN Authorization List of the delegate certificate that signed the request to determine if the caller is authorized to use that calling number in SIP.

No specific recommendation is made in the STIR certificates document for a means of determining the freshness of certificates with a TN Authorization List. This document explores how short-lived

certificates could be used as a means of preserving that freshness. Short-lived certificates also have a number of other desirable properties that fulfill important operational requirements for network operators. A mechanism such as the [Automated Certificate Management Environment \(ACME\)](#) [RFC8555] could be leveraged to manage these short-lived certificates, as well as various web-based interfaces or other out-of-band mechanisms. The interaction of STIR with ACME has already been explored in [RFC9448], so it provides a potentially attractive way of delivering short-lived certificates.

2. Terminology

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. Short-lived certificates for STIR

While there is no easy definition of what constitutes a "short-lived" certificate, the term typically refers to certificates that are valid only for days or even hours, as opposed to the months or years common in traditional public key infrastructures. When the private keying material associated with a certificate with an expiry of months or years is compromised by an adversary, the issuing authority must revoke the certificate, which requires relying parties to review certificate revocation lists or to access real-time status information with protocols such as OCSP. Short-lived certificates offer an alternative where, if compromised, certificates will shortly expire anyway, and rather than revoking and reissuing the certificate in response to a crisis, certificates routinely roll-over and cannot be cached for a long term by relying parties, minimizing their value to attackers.

One of the additional benefits of using short-lived certificates is that they do not require relying parties to perform any certificate freshness check. The trade-off is that the signer must acquire new certificates frequently, so the cost of round-trip times to the certificate authority is paid on the signer's side rather than the verifier's side; however, in environments where many parties may rely on a single certificate, or at least where a single certificate will be used to sign many transactions during its short lifetime, the overall architecture will incur fewer round-trip times to the certificate authority and thus less processing delay.

In the STIR context, the TN Authorization List defined in [RFC8226] adds a new wrinkle to the behavior of short-lived certificates, especially when the List is populated with telephone numbers or

number ranges instead of Service Provider Codes (SPCs). A subject may have authority over multiple telephone numbers, but a particular short-lived certificate issued to that subject could attest the authority over all, some, or just one of those telephone numbers. Short-lived certificates permit a more on-demand certification process, where subjects acquire certificates as needed, potentially in reaction to calls being placed. A STIR authentication service could even acquire a new certificate on a per-call basis that can only sign for the calling party number of the call in question, as it would expire immediately thereafter. At the other end of the spectrum, a large enterprise service provider could acquire a certificate valid for millions of numbers, but expire the certificate after a very short duration - on the order of hours - to reduce the risk that the certificate would be compromised.

This inherent flexibility in the short-lived certificate architecture would also permit authentication services to implement very narrow policies for certificate usage. A large service provider who wanted to avoid revealing which phone numbers they controlled, for example, could provide no information in the certificate that signs a call other than just the single telephone number that corresponds to the calling party's number. How frequently the service provider feels that they need to expire that certificate and acquire a new one is entirely a matter of local policy. This makes it much harder for entities monitoring signatures over calls to guess who owns which numbers, and provides a much more complicated threat surface for attackers trying to compromise the service.

4. Certificate conveyance with 'x5c'

In order to reduce the burden on verification services, an authentication service could also piggyback a short-lived certificate onto the PASSporT, so that no network lookup and consequent round-trip delay would be required on the terminating side to acquire the new certificate. In particular, the poor cacheability of short-lived certificates may require frequent fetches of certificates via the "x5u" PASSporT header element when relying parties validate PASSporTs.

As an optimization, this specification permits the conveyance of the certificate chain for a short-lived certificate via the "x5c" JWS header element ([\[RFC7515\]](#) Section 4.1.6). The "x5c" element contains a base64 encoded DER representation of the certificate chain. STIR Verification service implementations compliant with this specification MUST support the "x5c" element; authentication services SHOULD use the "x5c" format for PASSporTs signed by certificates with an expiry shorter than one week. The presence of x5y creates PASSporT objects that are considerable larger than typical RFC8225 tokens, and the longer the certificate chain, the

larger the PASSporT header will be. But provided the certificate chain leads to a trusted certification authority, "x5u" precludes the need for a round-trip time before validation at the STIR verification service.

An example PASSporT header with an "x5c" element with three certificates in its chain might look as follows:

```
{ "typ": "passport",
  "ppt": "div",
  "alg": "ES256",
  "x5c":
  [ "MIIE3jCCA8agAwIBAgICAwEwDQYJKoZIhvcNAQEFBQAwwYzELMAkGA1UEBhMCVVM
    xITAFBgNVBAoTGFROZSBHbyBEYWRkeSBHcm91cCwgSW5jLjExMC8GA1UECXMOR2
    8gRGFkZHKgQ2xhc3MgMiBDZXJ0aWZpY2F0aW9uIEF1dGhvcm10eTAeFw0wNjExM
    TYwMTU0MzdaFw0yNjExMTYwMTU0MzdaMIIHMQswCQYDVQQGEwJVUzEQMA4GA1UE
    CBMHQXJpem9uYTETMBEGA1UEBxMKU2NvdHRzZGFsZTEaMBGGA1UEChMRR29EYWR
    keS5jb20sIEluYy4xMzAxBgNVBAsTKmh0dHA6Ly9jZXJ0aWZpY2F0ZXMuZ29kYW
    RkeS5jb20vcmlvbnNpdG9yeTEwMC4GA1UEAxMnR28gRGFkZHKgU2VjdXJlIENlc
    nRpZm1jYXRpb24gQXV0aG9yaXR5MREwDwYDVQQFEwgnZk2OTI4NzCCASIdQYJ
    KoZIhvcNAQEBBQADggEPADCCAQoCggEBAMQt1RWMnCZM7DI161+4WQFapmGBWTt
    wY6vj3D3HKrjJM9N55DrtpDAjhI6zMBSS2sofDPZVUBJ7fmd0LJR4h3mUpfjWoqV
    Tr9vcyOdQmVZwt7/v+WIBxnvQAjYwqDL1CBM6nPwt27oDyqu9SoW1m2r4arV3aL
    GbqGmu75RpRSgAvSMeYddi5Kcju+GZtCpyz8/x4fKL4o/K1w/05epHBp+Y1Lpyo
    7RJlbr2EKRTcDCVw5wrWCs9CHRK8r5RsL+H0EwnWGu1NcWdrxcx+AuP7q2BNgW
    JCJjP0q8lh8BJ6qf9Z/dFjpfMFDniNow1fho3/Rb2cRGadDAW/hOUoz+EDU8CAW
    EAAaOCATIwggEuMBOGA1UdDgQWBbT9rGEyk2xF1uLuhV+auud2mWjM5zAFBgNVH
    SMEGDAGwBTSxLDSkdRMEXGzYcs9of7dqGrU4zASBgNVHRMBAf8ECDAGAQH/AgEA
    MDMGCCsGAQUFBwEBBCCwJTAjBggrBgEFBQcwAYYXaHR0cDovL29jc3AuZ29kYW
    RkeS5jb20wRgYDVROfBD8wPTA7oDmgN4Y1aHR0cDovL2N1cnRpZm1jYXRlcyc5nb2
    RhZGR5LmNvbS9yZXBvc2l0b3J5L2dkcm9vdC5jcmwwSwYDVROgBEQwQjBAbGVH
    SAAMDgWNgYIKwYBBQUHAQEwKmh0dHA6Ly9jZXJ0aWZpY2F0ZXMuZ29kYWwRkeS5j
    b20vcmlvbnNpdG9yeTA0BgNVHQ8BAf8EBAMCAQYwDQYJKoZIhvcNAQEFBQAADggE
    BANKGwOy9+aG2Z+5mC6IG0gRQjhVyrEp0lVPLN8tESe8HkGsZ2Zbw1Fa1EzAFPI
    UyIXvJxwqoJKSQ3kbTJSMUA2fCENZvD117esyfxVgqwcSeIaha86ykrV0e5GPLL
    5CkKSKB2XIsKd83Ase8T+5o0yGPwLpK9Qnt0hCqU7S+8MxZC9Y71hyVJEnfuz9
    p0iRFEU00jZv2kwzRaJBydTXRE4+uXR21aITVSzGh601mawGhId/dQb8vxRMDsx
    uxN89txJx90jxUUAiKEngHUuHqDTMBqLdElrRhjZkAzVvb3du6/KFUJheqwnTrZ
    EjYx8WnM25sgVjOuH0aBsXBTWU+4=",
    "MIIE+zCCBGsGawIBAgICAQ0wDQYJKoZIhvcNAQEFBQAwwbsxJDAiBgNVBAcTG1Z
    hbG1DZXJ0IFZhbG1kYXRpb24gTmV0d29yazEXMBUGA1UEChMOVmFsaUNlcnQsIE
    luYy4xNTAzBgNVBAsTTFZhbG1DZXJ0IENsYXNzIDIGUG9saWN5IFZhbG1kYXRpb
    24gQXV0aG9yaXR5MSEwHwYDVQQDExhodHRw0i8vd3d3LnZhbG1jZXJ0LmNvbS8x
    IDAeBgkqhkiG9w0BCQEWEluZm9AdmFsaWNlcnQuY29tMB4XDTA0MDYyOTE3MDY
    yMFoXDTE0MDYyOTE3MDYyMFowYzELMAkGA1UEBhMCVVMxITAFBgNVBAoTGFROZS
    BHbyBEYWRkeSBHcm91cCwgSW5jLjExMC8GA1UECXMOR28gRGFkZHKgQ2xhc3MgM
    iBDZXJ0aWZpY2F0aW9uIEF1dGhvcm10eTCCASAwDQYJKoZIhvcNAQEBBQADggEN
    ADCCAQgCggEBAN6d1+pXGEmhW+vXX0iG6r7d/+TvZxz0ZWizV3GgXne77ZtJ6XC
    APVYYYwhv2vLM0D9/AlQivBDYsoHUuHU9S3/Hd8M+eKsaA7Ugay9qK7HFih7Eux
    6wwdhFJ2+qN1j3hybX2C32qRe3H3I2TqYXP2WYktsqbl2i/ojgC95/5Y0V4evL0
    tXiEqITLdiOr18SPaAIBQi2XKVl0ARFmR6jYGB0xUGlcmIbYsUfb18aQr4CUWwo
    riMYavx4A6lNf4DD+qta/KFApMoZfV6yy09ecw3ud72a9nmYvLEHZ6IVDd2gWMZ
    Eewo+YihfukEHU1jPEX44dMX4/7VpkI+Ed0qXG68CAQ0jggHhMIIB3TAdBgNVHQ
    4EFgQU0sSw0pHUTBFxs2HLPaH+3ahq10MwgdIGA1UdIwSBYjCBx6GBwaSBvjCBu
    zEkMCIGA1UEBxMbVmFsaUNlcnQgVmFsaWRhdGlvbiB0ZXR3b3JrMRcwFQYDVQQK
    Ew5WYwpxQ2VydCwgSW5jLjE1MDMGA1UECXMsVmFsaUNlcnQgQ2xhc3MgMiBQb2x
    pY3kgVmFsaWRhdGlvbiBBdXR0b3JpdHkxITAFBgNVBAMTGh0dHA6Ly93d3cuZm
    9udm
```

```

FsaWNlcnQuY29tLzEgMB4GCSqGSIB3DQEJARYRaw5mb0B2YWxpY2VydC5jb22CA
QEwDwYDVR0TAQH/BAUwAwEB/zAzBggrBgEFBQcBAQQnMCUwIwYIKwYBBQUHMAGG
F2h0dHA6Ly9vY3NwLmdvZGFkZHKuY29tMEQGA1UdHwQ9MDswOaA3oDWGM2h0dHA
6Ly9jZXJ0aWZpY2F0ZXMuZ29kYWRkeS5jb20vcmlvbnNpdG9yeS9yb290LmNybD
BLBGNVHSAERDBCMEAGBFudIAAw0DA2BggrBgEFBQcCARYqaHR0cDovL2NlcnRpZ
mljYXRlcY5nb2RhZGR5LmNvbS9yZXBvc2l0b3J5MA4GA1UdDwEB/wQEAWIBBJAN
BgkqhkiG9w0BAQUFAA0BgQC1QPmnHfbq/qQaQ1pE9xXUHuaJwL6e4+PrxeNYiY+
Sn1eocSxI0YGyeR+sBjUZsE40WBsUs5iB0QQeyAfJg594RAoYC5jcdnp1DQ1tgm
QLARzLrUc+cb53S8wGd9D0VmsfSx0aFIqII6hR8INMqzW/Rn453HWkrugp++85j
09VZw==" ,
"MIIC5zCCA1ACAQEwDQYJKoZIhvcNAQEFBQAwbgsxJDAiBgNVBACGTG1ZhbG1DZXJ
0IFZhbG1kYXRpb24gTmV0d29yazEXMBUGA1UEChMOVmFsaUNlcnQsIEluYy4xNT
AzBgNVBAsTLFZhbG1DZXJ0IENsYXNzIDIGUG9saWN5IFZhbG1kYXRpb24gQXV0a
G9yaXR5MSEwHwYDVQQDEExodHRwOi8vd3d3LnZhbG1jZXJ0LmNvbS8xIDAeBgkq
hkiG9w0BCQEWEluZm9AdmFsaWNlcnQuY29tMB4XDTk5MDYyNjAwMTk1NFoXDTE
5MDYyNjAwMTk1NFowgbsxJDAiBgNVBACGTG1ZhbG1DZXJ0IFZhbG1kYXRpb24gTm
V0d29yazEXMBUGA1UEChMOVmFsaUNlcnQsIEluYy4xNTAzBgNVBAsTLFZhbG1DZ
XJ0IENsYXNzIDIGUG9saWN5IFZhbG1kYXRpb24gQXV0aG9yaXR5MSEwHwYDVQQD
ExhodHRwOi8vd3d3LnZhbG1jZXJ0LmNvbS8xIDAeBgkqhkiG9w0BCQEWEluZm9
AdmFsaWNlcnQuY29tMIGfMA0GCSqGSIB3DQEBAAQAA4GNADCBiQKBgQD00nHK5a
vIWZJV16vYdA757tn2VUdZzUc0BVXc65g2PFxTXdMwzzjvUGJ7SVCCSRrC16zf
N1SLUzm1NZ9WlmpZdRJEy0kTRxQb7XBhVQ7/nHk01xC+YDgkRoKWzk2Z/M/VXwb
P7RfZHM047Qsv4dk+NoS/zcnwbNDu+97bi5p9wIDAQABMA0GCSqGSIB3DQEBBQU
AA4GBADt/UG9vUJSZSWI40B9L+KXIPqeCgfYrx+jFzug6EILLGAC0Tb2oWH+heQ
C1u+mNr0HZDzTuIYEZodJJKPTEjlbVUjP9UNV+mWwD5MlM/Mtsq2azSiGM5bUMM
j4QsssodyamEwCW/P0uZ6lcg5Ktz885hZo+L7tdEy8W9ViH0Pd"]
}

```

[TBD - certificate above is the example from RFC7515]

A potential alternative approach would be that [\[RFC8224\]](#) already provides a way of pointing to a certificate in a MIME body associated with the SIP request. For out-of-band uses of STIR, however, having the certificate embedded in the PASSporT itself is a superior option.

5. Certificate Acquisition with ACME

One of the primary challenges facing short-lived certificates is building an operational system that allows signers to acquire new certificates and put them to immediate use. ACME [\[RFC8555\]](#) is designed for exactly this purpose. After a client registers with an ACME server, and the authority of the client for the names in question is established (through means such as [\[RFC9448\]](#)), the client can at any time apply for a certificate to be issued by sending an appropriate JSON request to the server. That request will contain a CSR [\[RFC2986\]](#) indicating the intended scope of authority as well the validity interval of the certificate in question.

Ultimately, this will enable the client to download the certificate from a certificate URL designated by the server.

ACME is based on the concept that clients establish accounts at an ACME server, and that through challenges, the server learns which identifiers it will issue for certificates requested for an account. Any given certificate issued for an account can be for just one of those identifiers, or potentially for more: this is determined by the CSR that an ACME client creates for a particular order. Thus, a service provider with authority for millions of identifiers - that is, millions of telephone numbers - could create a CSR for an ACME order that requests a certificate only associated with one of those telephone numbers if it so desired. The same would be true of certificates based on Service Provider Codes (SPCs) as described in [\[RFC8226\]](#): a service provider might have just one SPC or perhaps many. ACME thus puts needed flexibility into the hands of the clients requesting certificates to determine how much of their authority they want to invest in any given certificate.

[\[RFC9448\]](#) uses the ATC framework of [\[RFC9447\]](#) to generate tokens that are provided to the CA in response to ACME challenges. For a usage with short-term certificates, it may make sense for the ATC tokens to have a relatively long expiry, so that the ACME client does not have to constantly return to the Token Authority for new tokens. This could potentially be used with the [ACME STAR](#) [\[RFC8739\]](#) mechanism as well.

6. IANA Considerations

This document contains no actions for the IANA.

7. Privacy Considerations

Short-lived certificates provide attractive privacy properties when compared to real-time status query protocols like OCSP, which require relying parties to perform a network dip that can reveal a great deal about the source and destination of communications. For STIR, these problems are compounded by the presence of the TN Authorization List extension to certificates. Short-lived certificates can minimize the data that needs to appear in the TN Authorization List, and consequently reduce the amount of information about the caller leaked by certificate usage to an amount equal to what is leaked by the call signaling itself.

8. Security Considerations

This document is entirely about security. For further information on certificate security and practices, see [\[RFC5280\]](#), in particular its Security Considerations. The Security Considerations of [\[RFC8555\]](#) are relevant to the use of ACME to acquire short-lived certificates.

9. Acknowledgments

Stephen Farrell, Jack Richard and Chris Wendt provided key input to the discussions leading to this document.

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Author's Address

Jon Peterson
Neustar, Inc.

Email: jon.peterson@team.neustar