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Best practices for password hashing and storage

Abstract

This document outlines best practices for handling user passwords and other authenticator secrets in client-server systems making use of SASL.

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1. Introduction

Following best practices when hashing and storing passwords for use with SASL impacts a great deal more than just a users identity. It also effects usability, backwards compatibility, and interoperability by determining what authentication and authorization mechanisms can be used.

Many of the recommendations in this document were taken from [\[NIST.SP.800-63b\]](#) and [\[NIST.SP.800-132\]](#).

1.1. Conventions and Terminology

Various security-related terms are to be understood in the sense defined in [\[RFC4949\]](#). Some may also be defined in [\[NIST.SP.800-63-3\]](#) Appendix A.1 and in [\[NIST.SP.800-132\]](#) section 3.1.

Throughout this document the term "password" is used to mean any password, passphrase, PIN, or other memorized secret.

The term "pepper" is used to mean a secret added to a password hash like a salt. Unlike a salt, peppers are secret, not unique, and are not stored alongside the hashed password.

Mechanism pinning is a security mechanism which allows SASL clients to resist downgrade attacks. Clients that implement mechanism pinning remember the perceived strength of the SASL mechanism used in a previous successful authentication attempt and thereafter only authenticate using mechanisms of equal or higher perceived strength.

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.

2. SASL Mechanisms

For clients and servers that support password based authentication using [\[RFC4422\]](#) it is **RECOMMENDED** that the following SCRAM based mechanisms be implemented:

*[SCRAM-SHA-256](#) [\[RFC7677\]](#)

*[SCRAM-SHA-256-PLUS](#) [\[RFC7677\]](#)

System entities **SHOULD NOT** invent their own mechanisms that have not been standardized by the IETF or another reputable standards body. Similarly, entities **SHOULD NOT** implement any mechanism with a usage

status of "OBSOLETE", "MUST NOT be used", or "LIMITED" in the [IANA SASL Mechanisms Registry](#) [[IANA.sasl.mechanisms](#)].

3. Client Best Practices

3.1. Mechanism Pinning

Clients often maintain a list of preferred SASL mechanisms, generally ordered by perceived strength to enable strong authentication. To prevent downgrade attacks by a malicious actor that has successfully man in the middle a connection, or compromised a trusted server's configuration, clients **SHOULD** implement "mechanism pinning". That is, after the first successful authentication with a strong mechanism, clients **SHOULD** make a record of the authentication and thereafter only advertise and use mechanisms of equal or higher perceived strength.

For reference, the following mechanisms are ordered by their perceived strength from strongest to weakest with mechanisms of equal strength on the same line. This list is a non-normative example. In particular this example does not imply that mechanisms in this list should or should not be supported.

1. EXTERNAL
2. SCRAM-SHA-1-PLUS, SCRAM-SHA-256-PLUS
3. SCRAM-SHA-1, SCRAM-SHA-256
4. PLAIN
5. DIGEST-MD5, CRAM-MD5

The EXTERNAL mechanism defined in [[RFC4422](#)] appendix A is placed at the top of the list. However it should be noted that its perceived strength is equal to that of its underlying authentication protocol. In this example, we assume that [TLS](#) [[RFC8446](#)] services are being used which can provide a strong authenticator assurance level.

The channel binding ("-PLUS") variants of SCRAM are listed above their non-channel binding cousins, but may not always be available depending on the type of channel binding data available to the SASL negotiator.

The PLAIN mechanism sends the username and password in plain text. It is therefore REQUIRED that a strong security layer such as [TLS](#) [[RFC8446](#)] be negotiated before using PLAIN.

Finally, the DIGEST-MD5 and CRAM-MD5 mechanisms are listed last because they use weak hashes and ciphers and prevent the server from

storing passwords using a strong key derivation function. For a list of problems with DIGEST-MD5 see [[RFC6331](#)].

3.2. Storage

Clients **SHOULD** always store authenticators in a trusted and encrypted keystore such as the system keystore, or an encrypted store created specifically for the clients use. They **SHOULD NOT** store authenticators as plain text.

If clients know that they will only ever authenticate using a mechanism such as SCRAM where the original password is not needed after the first authentication attempt they **SHOULD** store the SCRAM bits or the hashed and salted password instead of the original password. However, if backwards compatibility with servers that only support the PLAIN mechanism or other mechanisms that require using the original password is required, clients **MAY** choose to store the original password so long as an appropriate keystore is used.

4. Server Best Practices

4.1. Additional SASL Requirements

Servers **MUST NOT** support any mechanism that would require authenticators to be stored in such a way that they could be recovered in plain text from the stored information. This includes mechanisms that store authenticators using reversible encryption, obsolete hashing mechanisms such as MD5, and hashes that are unsuitable for use with authenticators such as SHA256.

4.2. Storage

Servers **MUST** always store passwords only after they have been salted and hashed. A distinct salt **SHOULD** be used for each user, and each SCRAM family supported. Salts **MUST** be generated using a cryptographically secure random number generator. The salt **MAY** be stored in the same datastore as the password. If it is stored alongside the password, it **SHOULD** be combined with a pepper stored in the application configuration, an environment variable, or some other location other than the datastore containing the salts.

The following restrictions **MUST** be observed when generating salts and peppers:

Parameter	Value
Minimum Salt Length	16 bytes
Minimum Pepper Length	32 bytes

Table 1: Common Parameters

4.3. Authentication and Rotation

When authenticating using PLAIN or similar mechanisms that involve transmitting the original password to the server the password **MUST** be hashed and compared against the salted and hashed password in the database using a constant time comparison.

Each time a password is changed a new random salt **MUST** be created and the iteration count and pepper (if applicable) **MUST** be updated to the latest value required by server policy.

If a pepper is used, consideration should be taken to ensure that it can be easily rotated. For example, multiple peppers could be stored. New passwords and reset passwords would use the newest pepper and a hash of the pepper using a cryptographically secure hash function such as SHA256 could then be stored in the database next to the salt so that future logins can identify which pepper in the list was used. This is just one example, pepper rotation schemes are outside the scope of this document.

5. KDF Recommendations

The recommendations in this section may change depending on the type of hardware being used and the security level required for the application. With all Key Derivation Functions proper tuning is required to ensure that it meets the needs of the specific application or service.

5.1. Argon2

[Argon2](#) [[ARGON2ESP](#)] is a winner of the Password Hashing Competition and has been recommended by OWASP for password hashing.

Security considerations, test vectors, and parameters for tuning argon2 can be found in [[I-D.irtf-cfrg-argon2](#)].

5.2. Bcrypt

[bcrypt](#) [[BCRYPT](#)] is a Blowfish-based KDF that is the current OWASP recommendation for password hashing.

Parameter	Value
Recommended Cost	12
Maximum Password Length	64

Table 2: Bcrypt Parameters

5.3. PBKDF2

[PBKDF2](#) [[RFC8018](#)] is the key derivation function used by the SCRAM family of SASL mechanisms.

Parameter	Value
Minimum Iterations	10,000
Recommended HMAC Hash	SHA256

Table 3: PBKDF2 Parameters

5.4. Scrypt

The [[SCRYPT](#)] key derivation function is designed to be memory-hard and sequential memory-hard to prevent against custom hardware based attacks.

Security considerations, test vectors, and further notes on tuning scrypt may be found in [[RFC7914](#)].

Parameter	Value
N	32768 ($N=2^{15}$)
r	8
p	1

Table 4: Scrypt Parameters

6. Password Complexity Requirements

Before any other password complexity requirements are checked, the preparation and enforcement steps of the OpaqueString profile of [[RFC8265](#)] **SHOULD** be applied (for more information see the Internationalization Considerations section). Entities **SHOULD** enforce a minimum length of 8 characters for user passwords. If using a mechanism such as PLAIN where the server performs hashing on the original password, a maximum length between 64 and 128 characters **MAY** be imposed to prevent denial of service (DoS) attacks. Entities **SHOULD NOT** apply any other password restrictions.

In addition to these password complexity requirements, servers **SHOULD** maintain a password blacklist and reject attempts by a claimant to use passwords on the blacklist during registration or password reset. The contents of this blacklist are a matter of server policy. Some common recommendations include lists of common passwords that are not otherwise prevented by length requirements, passwords present in known breaches (when paired with the same email or other uniquely identifying information) to prevent reuse of compromised passwords, and password that match commonly used patterns such as "any single repeated character".

7. Internationalization Considerations

The PRECIS framework (Preparation, Enforcement, and Comparison of Internationalized Strings) defined in [RFC8264] is used to enforce internationalization rules on strings and to prevent common application security issues arising from allowing the full range of Unicode codepoints in usernames, passwords, and other identifiers. The OpaqueString profile of [RFC8265] is used in this document to ensure that codepoints in passwords are treated carefully and consistently. This ensures that users typing certain characters on different keyboards that may provide different versions of the same character will still be able to log in. For example, some keyboards may output the full-width version of a character while other keyboards output the half-width version of the same character. The Width Mapping rule of the OpaqueString profile addresses this and ensures that comparison succeeds and the claimant is able to be authenticated.

8. Security Considerations

This document contains recommendations that are likely to change over time. It should be reviewed regularly to ensure that it remains accurate and up to date. Many of the recommendations in this document were taken from the [OWASP.CS.passwords].

9. IANA Considerations

This document has no actions for IANA.

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