Encryption and Hash Algorithms Used in VPN

Because a VPN tunnel typically traverses a public network, most likely the Internet, you need to encrypt the connection to protect the traffic. You define the encryption and other security techniques to apply using IKE policies and IPsec proposals.

If your device license allows you to apply strong encryption, there is a wide range of encryption and hash algorithms, and Diffie-Hellman groups, from which to choose. However, as a general rule, the stronger the encryption that you apply to the tunnel, the worse the system performance. Find a balance between security and performance that provides sufficient protection without compromising efficiency.

We cannot provide specific guidance on which options to choose. If you operate within a larger corporation or other organization, there might already be defined standards that you need to meet. If not, take the time to research the options.

The following topics explain the available options:

Deciding Which Encryption Algorithm to Use

When determining which encryption algorithms to use for the IKE policy or IPsec proposal, your choice is limited to algorithms supported by the devices in the VPN.

For IKEv2, you can configure multiple encryption algorithms. The system orders the settings from the most secure to the least secure and negotiates with the peer using that order. For IKEv1, you can select a single option only.

For IPsec proposals, the algorithm is used by the Encapsulating Security Protocol (ESP), which provides authentication, encryption, and anti-replay services. ESP is IP protocol type 50. In IKEv1 IPsec proposals, the algorithm name is prefixed with ESP.

If your device license qualifies for strong encryption, you can choose from the following encryption algorithms. If you are not qualified for strong encryption, you can select DES only.

- AES-GCM—(IKEv2 only.) Advanced Encryption Standard in Galois/Counter Mode is a block cipher mode of operation providing confidentiality and data-origin authentication and provides greater security than AES. AES-GCM offers three different key strengths: 128-, 192-, and 256-bit keys. A longer key provides higher security but a reduction in performance. GCM is a mode of AES that is required to support NSA Suite B. NSA Suite B is a set of cryptographic algorithms that devices must support to meet federal standards for cryptographic strength.

- AES-GMAC—(IKEv2 IPsec proposals only.) Advanced Encryption Standard Galois Message Authentication Code is a block cipher mode of operation providing only data-origin authentication. It is a variant of AES-GCM that allows data authentication without encrypting the data. AES-GMAC offers three different key strengths: 128-, 192-, and 256-bit keys.

- AES—Advanced Encryption Standard is a symmetric cipher algorithm that provides greater security than DES and...
is computationally more efficient than 3DES. AES offers three different key strengths: 128-, 192-, and 256-bit keys. A longer key provides higher security but a reduction in performance.

- DES—Data Encryption Standard, which encrypts using 56-bit keys, is a symmetric secret-key block algorithm. If your license account does not meet the requirements for export controls, this is your only option. It is faster than 3DES and uses fewer system resources, but it is also less secure. If you do not need strong data confidentiality, and if system resources or speed is a concern, choose DES.
- 3DES—Triple DES, which encrypts three times using 56-bit keys, is more secure than DES because it processes each block of data three times with a different key. However, it uses more system resources and is slower than DES.
- NULL — A null encryption algorithm provides authentication without encryption. This is typically used for testing purposes only.

---

### Deciding Which Hash Algorithms to Use

In IKE policies, the hash algorithm creates a message digest, which is used to ensure message integrity. In IKEv2, the hash algorithm is separated into two options, one for the integrity algorithm, and one for the pseudo-random function (PRF).

In IPsec proposals, the hash algorithm is used by the Encapsulating Security Protocol (ESP) for authentication. In IKEv2 IPsec Proposals, this is called the integrity hash. In IKEv1 IPsec proposals, the algorithm name is prefixed with ESP-, and there is also an -HMAC suffix (which stands for “hash method authentication code”).

For IKEv2, you can configure multiple hash algorithms. The system orders the settings from the most secure to the least secure and negotiates with the peer using that order. For IKEv1, you can select a single option only.

You can choose from the following hash algorithms:

- **SHA (Secure Hash Algorithm)—**Standard SHA (SHA-1) produces a 160-bit digest. SHA is more resistant to brute-force attacks than MD5. However, it is also more resource-intensive than MD5. For implementations that require the highest level of security, use the SHA hash algorithm.

- **The following SHA-2 options, which are even more secure, are available for IKEv2 configurations. Choose one of these if you want to implement the NSA Suite B cryptography specification.**
  - SHA-256—Specifies the Secure Hash Algorithm SHA-2 with the 256-bit digest.
  - SHA-384—Specifies the Secure Hash Algorithm SHA-2 with the 384-bit digest.
  - SHA-512—Specifies the Secure Hash Algorithm SHA-2 with the 512-bit digest.

- **MD5 (Message Digest 5)—**Produces a 128-bit digest. MD5 uses less processing time for overall faster performance than SHA, but it is considered to be weaker than SHA.

- **Null or None (NULL, ESP-NONE)—**(IPsec Proposals only.) A null Hash Algorithm; this is typically used for testing purposes only. However, you should choose the null integrity algorithm if you select one of the AES-GCM/GMAC options as the encryption algorithm. Even if you choose a non-null option, the integrity hash is ignored for these encryption standards.
Deciding Which Diffie-Hellman Modulus Group to Use

You can use the following Diffie-Hellman key derivation algorithms to generate IPsec security association (SA) keys. Each group has different size modules. A larger modulus provides higher security but requires more processing time. You must have a matching modulus group on both peers.

If you select AES encryption, to support the large key sizes required by AES, you should use Diffie-Hellman (DH) Group 5 or higher. IKEv1 policies do not support all of the groups listed below.

To implement the NSA Suite B cryptography specification, use IKEv2 and select one of the elliptic curve Diffie-Hellman (ECDH) options: 19, 20, or 21. Elliptic curve options and groups that use 2048-bit modulus are less exposed to attacks such as Logjam.

For IKEv2, you can configure multiple groups. The system orders the settings from the most secure to the least secure and negotiates with the peer using that order. For IKEv1, you can select a single option only.

• 2—Diffie-Hellman Group 2: 1024-bit modular exponential (MODP) group. This option is no longer considered good protection.
• 5—Diffie-Hellman Group 5: 1536-bit MODP group. Formerly considered good protection for 128-bit keys, this option is no longer considered good protection.
• 19—Diffie-Hellman Group 19: National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) 256-bit elliptic curve modulo a prime (ECP) group.
• 20—Diffie-Hellman Group 20: NIST 384-bit ECP group.
• 24—Diffie-Hellman Group 24: 2048-bit MODP group with 256-bit prime order subgroup. This option is no longer recommended.

Deciding Which Authentication Method to Use

You can use the following methods to authenticate the peers in a site-to-site VPN connection.

Preshared Keys

Preshared keys are secret key strings configured on each peer in the connection. These keys are used by IKE during the authentication phase. For IKEv1, you must configure the same preshared key on each peer. For IKEv2, you can configure unique keys on each peer.

Preshared keys do not scale well compared to certificates. If you need to configure a large number of site-to-site VPN connections, use the certificate method instead of the preshared key method.