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Authors: A. Backman, Ed. M. Scurtescu P. Jain
Amazon Coinbase Fastly

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Subject Identifiers for Security Event Tokens

Abstract

Security events communicated within Security Event Tokens may support a variety of identifiers to identify subjects related to the event. This specification formalizes the notion of Subject Identifiers as structured information that describes a subject and named formats that define the syntax and semantics for encoding Subject Identifiers as JSON objects. It also establishes a registry for defining and allocating names for such formats as well as the JSON Web Token (JWT) "sub_id" Claim.

Status of This Memo

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1. Introduction

As described in [Section 1.2](#) of [\[RFC8417\]](#) ("[Security Event Token \(SET\)](#)"), subjects related to security events may take a variety of forms, including but not limited to a [JWT \[RFC7519\]](#) principal, an IP address, a URL, etc. Different types of subjects may need to be identified in different ways (e.g., a user might be identified by an email address, a phone number, or an account number). Furthermore, even in the case where the type of the subject is known, there may be multiple ways by which a given subject may be identified. For example, an account may be identified by an opaque identifier, an email address, a phone number, a JWT "iss" Claim and "sub" Claim, etc., depending on the nature and needs of the transmitter and receiver. Even within the context of a given transmitter and receiver relationship, it may be appropriate to identify different accounts in different ways, for example, if some accounts only have email addresses associated with them while others only have phone numbers. Therefore, it can be necessary to indicate within a SET the mechanism by which a subject is being identified.

To address this problem, this specification defines Subject Identifiers as JSON [\[RFC8259\]](#) objects containing information identifying a subject and defines Identifier Formats as named sets of rules describing how to encode different kinds of subject-identifying information (e.g., an email address or an issuer and subject pair) as a Subject Identifier.

Below is a non-normative example of a Subject Identifier that identifies a subject by email address, using the Email Identifier Format.

```
{
  "format": "email",
  "email": "user@example.com"
}
```

Figure 1: Example: Subject Identifier Using the Email Identifier Format

Subject Identifiers are intended to be a general-purpose mechanism for identifying subjects within JSON objects, and their usage need not be limited to SETs. Below is a non-normative example of a JWT that uses a Subject Identifier in the JWT "sub_id" Claim (defined in this specification) to identify the JWT Subject.

```
{
  "iss": "issuer.example.com",
  "sub_id": {
    "format": "phone_number",
    "phone_number": "+12065550100"
  }
}
```

Figure 2: Example: JWT Using a Subject Identifier with the JWT "sub_id" Claim

Usage of Subject Identifiers also need not be limited to identifying JWT Subjects. They are intended as a general-purpose means of expressing identifying information in an unambiguous manner. Below is a non-normative example of a SET containing a hypothetical security event describing the interception of a message, using Subject Identifiers to identify the sender, intended recipient, and interceptor.

```
{
  "iss": "issuer.example.com",
  "iat": 1508184845,
  "aud": "aud.example.com",
  "events": {
    "https://secevent.example.com/events/message-interception": {
      "from": {
        "format": "email",
        "email": "alice@example.com"
      },
      "to": {
        "format": "email",
        "email": "bob@example.com"
      },
      "interceptor": {
        "format": "email",
        "email": "eve@example.com"
      }
    }
  }
}
```

Figure 3: Example: SET with an Event Payload Containing Multiple Subject Identifiers

2. Notational Conventions

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.

2.1. Definitions

This specification utilizes terminology defined in [RFC8259] and [RFC8417].

Within this specification, the terms "Subject" and "subject" refer generically to anything being identified via one or more pieces of information. The term "JWT Subject" refers specifically to the subject of a JWT (i.e., the subject that the JWT asserts claims about).

3. Subject Identifiers

A Subject Identifier is a JSON object [RFC8259] whose contents may be used to identify a subject within some context. An Identifier Format is a named definition of a set of information that may be used to identify a subject and the rules for encoding that information as a Subject Identifier; these rules define the syntax and semantics of Subject Identifiers. A Subject Identifier **MUST** conform to a specific Identifier Format and **MUST** contain a "format" member whose value is the name of that Identifier Format.

Every Identifier Format **MUST** have a unique name registered in the IANA "Security Event Identifier Formats" registry established in Section 8.1 or a Collision-Resistant Name as defined in [RFC7519]. Identifier Formats that are expected to be used broadly by a variety of parties **SHOULD** be registered in the "Security Event Identifier Formats" registry.

An Identifier Format **MAY** describe more members than are strictly necessary to identify a subject and **MAY** describe conditions under which those members are required, optional, or prohibited. The "format" member is reserved for use as described in this specification; Identifier Formats **MUST NOT** declare any rules regarding the "format" member.

Every member within a Subject Identifier **MUST** match the rules specified for that member by this specification or by a Subject Identifier's Identifier Format. A Subject Identifier **MUST NOT** contain any members prohibited or not described by its Identifier Format and **MUST** contain all members required by its Identifier Format.

3.1. Identifier Formats versus Principal Types

Identifier Formats define how to encode identifying information for a subject. Unlike Principal Types, they do not define the type or nature of the subject itself. For example, while the Email Identifier Format declares that the value of the "email" member is an email address, a subject in a security event that is identified by an Email Subject Identifier could be an end user who

controls that email address, the mailbox itself, or anything else that the transmitter and receiver both understand to be associated with that email address. Consequently, Subject Identifiers remove ambiguity around how a subject is being identified and how to parse an identifying structure, but they do not remove ambiguity around how to resolve that identifier for a subject. For example, consider a directory management API that allows callers to identify users and groups through both opaque unique identifiers and email addresses. Such an API could use Subject Identifiers to disambiguate between which of these two types of identifiers is in use. However, the API would have to determine whether the subject is a user or group via some other means, such as by querying a database, interpreting other parameters in the request, or inferring the type from the API contract.

3.2. Identifier Format Definitions

The following Identifier Formats are registered in the IANA "Security Event Identifier Formats" registry established in [Section 8.1](#).

Since the Subject Identifier Format conveys semantic information, applications **SHOULD** choose the most specific possible format for the identifier in question. For example, an email address can be conveyed using a "mailto:" URI and the URI Identifier Format, but since the value is known to be an email address, the application should prefer to use the Email Identifier Format instead.

3.2.1. Account Identifier Format

The Account Identifier Format identifies a subject using an account at a service provider, identified with an "acct" URI as defined in [\[RFC7565\]](#). An account is an arrangement or agreement through which a user gets access to a service and gets a unique identity with the service provider. Subject Identifiers in this format **MUST** contain a "uri" member whose value is the "acct" URI for the subject. The "uri" member is **REQUIRED** and **MUST NOT** be null or empty. The Account Identifier Format is identified by a value of "account" in the "format" member.

Below is a non-normative example Subject Identifier for the Account Identifier Format:

```
{
  "format": "account",
  "uri": "acct:example.user@service.example.com"
}
```

Figure 4: Example: Subject Identifier for the Account Identifier Format

3.2.2. Email Identifier Format

The Email Identifier Format identifies a subject using an email address. Subject Identifiers in this format **MUST** contain an "email" member whose value is a string containing the email address of the subject, formatted as an "addr-spec" as defined in [Section 3.4.1](#) of [\[RFC5322\]](#). The "email" member is **REQUIRED** and **MUST NOT** be null or empty. The value of the "email" member **MUST** identify a mailbox to which email may be delivered, in accordance with [\[RFC5321\]](#). The Email Identifier Format is identified by the name "email".

Below is a non-normative example Subject Identifier in the Email Identifier Format:

```
{
  "format": "email",
  "email": "user@example.com"
}
```

Figure 5: Example: Subject Identifier in the Email Identifier Format

3.2.2.1. Email Canonicalization

Many email providers will treat multiple email addresses as equivalent. While the domain portion of an email address [RFC5322] is consistently treated as case-insensitive per [RFC1034], most providers treat the local part of the email address as case-insensitive as well and consider "user@example.com", "User@example.com", and "USER@example.com" as the same email address. Some providers also treat dots (".") as optional; for example, "user.name@example.com", "username@example.com", "u.s.e.r.name@example.com", and "u.s.e.r.n.a.m.e@example.com" might all be treated as equivalent. This has led users to view these strings as equivalent, driving service providers to implement proprietary email canonicalization algorithms to ensure that email addresses entered by users resolve to the same canonical string. Email canonicalization is not standardized, and there is no way for the event recipient to determine the mail provider's canonicalization method. Therefore, the recipient **SHOULD** apply its own canonicalization algorithm to incoming events in order to reproduce the translation done by the local email system.

3.2.3. Issuer and Subject Identifier Format

The Issuer and Subject Identifier Format identifies a subject using a pair of "iss" and "sub" members, analogous to how subjects are identified using the JWT "iss" and "sub" Claims in [OpenID Connect \[OpenID.Core\]](#) ID Tokens. These members **MUST** follow the formats of the "iss" member and "sub" member defined by [RFC7519], respectively. Both the "iss" member and the "sub" member are **REQUIRED** and **MUST NOT** be null or empty. The Issuer and Subject Identifier Format is identified by the name "iss_sub".

Below is a non-normative example Subject Identifier in the Issuer and Subject Identifier Format:

```
{
  "format": "iss_sub",
  "iss": "https://issuer.example.com/",
  "sub": "145234573"
}
```

Figure 6: Example: Subject Identifier in the Issuer and Subject Identifier Format

3.2.4. Opaque Identifier Format

The Opaque Identifier Format describes a subject that is identified with a string with no semantics asserted beyond its usage as an identifier for the subject, such as a Universally Unique Identifier (UUID) or hash used as a surrogate identifier for a record in a database. Subject Identifiers in this format **MUST** contain an "id" member whose value is a JSON string containing the opaque string identifier for the subject. The "id" member is **REQUIRED** and **MUST NOT** be null or empty. The Opaque Identifier Format is identified by the name "opaque".

Below is a non-normative example Subject Identifier in the Opaque Identifier Format:

```
{
  "format": "opaque",
  "id": "11112222333344445555"
}
```

Figure 7: Example: Subject Identifier in the Opaque Identifier Format

3.2.5. Phone Number Identifier Format

The Phone Number Identifier Format identifies a subject using a telephone number. Subject Identifiers in this format **MUST** contain a "phone_number" member whose value is a string containing the full telephone number of the subject, including an international dialing prefix, formatted according to [E.164 \[E164\]](#). The "phone_number" member is **REQUIRED** and **MUST NOT** be null or empty. The Phone Number Identifier Format is identified by the name "phone_number".

Below is a non-normative example Subject Identifier in the Phone Number Identifier Format:

```
{
  "format": "phone_number",
  "phone_number": "+12065550100"
}
```

Figure 8: Example: Subject Identifier in the Phone Number Identifier Format

3.2.6. Decentralized Identifier (DID) Format

The Decentralized Identifier (DID) Format identifies a subject using a DID URL as defined in [\[DID\]](#). Subject Identifiers in this format **MUST** contain a "url" member whose value is a DID URL for the DID Subject being identified. The value of the "url" member **MUST** be a valid DID URL and **MAY** be a bare DID. The "url" member is **REQUIRED** and **MUST NOT** be null or empty. The Decentralized Identifier Format is identified by the name "did".

Below are non-normative example Subject Identifiers for the Decentralized Identifier Format:


```
{
  "format": "did",
  "url": "did:example:123456"
}
```

Figure 9: Example: Subject Identifier for the Decentralized Identifier Format, Identifying a Subject with a Bare DID

```
{
  "format": "did",
  "url": "did:example:123456/did/url/path?versionId=1"
}
```

Figure 10: Example: Subject Identifier for the Decentralized Identifier Format, Identifying a Subject with a DID URL with Non-empty Path and Query Components

3.2.7. Uniform Resource Identifier (URI) Format

The Uniform Resource Identifier (URI) Format identifies a subject using a URI as defined in [RFC3986]. This Identifier Format makes no assumptions or guarantees with regard to the content, scheme, or reachability of the URI within the field. Subject Identifiers in this format **MUST** contain a "uri" member whose value is a URI for the subject being identified. The "uri" member is **REQUIRED** and **MUST NOT** be null or empty. The URI Format is identified by the name "uri".

Below are non-normative example Subject Identifiers for the URI Format:

```
{
  "format": "uri",
  "uri": "https://user.example.com/"
}
```

Figure 11: Example: Subject Identifier for the URI Format, Identifying a Subject with a Website URI

```
{
  "format": "uri",
  "uri": "urn:uuid:4e851e98-83c4-4743-a5da-150ecb53042f"
}
```

Figure 12: Example: Subject Identifier for the URI Format, Identifying a Subject with a Random URN

3.2.8. Aliases Identifier Format

The Aliases Identifier Format describes a subject that is identified with a list of different Subject Identifiers. It is intended for use when a variety of identifiers have been shared with the party that will be interpreting the Subject Identifier, and it is unknown which of those identifiers they will recognize or support. Subject Identifiers in this format **MUST** contain an "identifiers"

member whose value is a JSON array containing one or more Subject Identifiers. Each Subject Identifier in the array **MUST** identify the same entity. The "identifiers" member is **REQUIRED** and **MUST NOT** be null or empty. It **MAY** contain multiple instances of the same Identifier Format (e.g., multiple Email Subject Identifiers) but **SHOULD NOT** contain exact duplicates. This format is identified by the name "aliases".

"aliases" Subject Identifiers **MUST NOT** be nested, i.e., the "identifiers" member of an "aliases" Subject Identifier **MUST NOT** contain a Subject Identifier in the Aliases Identifier Format.

Below is a non-normative example Subject Identifier in the Aliases Identifier Format:

```
{
  "format": "aliases",
  "identifiers": [
    {
      "format": "email",
      "email": "user@example.com"
    },
    {
      "format": "phone_number",
      "phone_number": "+12065550100"
    },
    {
      "format": "email",
      "email": "user+qualifier@example.com"
    }
  ]
}
```

Figure 13: Example: Subject Identifier in the Aliases Identifier Format

4. Subject Identifiers in JWTs

4.1. JWT "sub_id" Claim

The JWT "sub" Claim is defined in [Section 4.1.2](#) of [\[RFC7519\]](#) as containing a string value; therefore, it cannot contain a Subject Identifier (which is a JSON object) as its value. This document defines the JWT "sub_id" Claim, in accordance with [Section 4.2](#) of [\[RFC7519\]](#), as a common claim that identifies the JWT Subject using a Subject Identifier. When present, the value of this claim **MUST** be a Subject Identifier that identifies the subject of the JWT. The JWT "sub_id" Claim **MAY** be included in a JWT, whether or not the JWT "sub" Claim is present. When both the JWT "sub" and "sub_id" Claims are present in a JWT, they **MUST** identify the same subject, as a JWT has one and only one JWT Subject.

When processing a JWT with both JWT "sub" and "sub_id" Claims, implementations **MUST NOT** rely on both claims to determine the JWT Subject. An implementation **MAY** attempt to determine the JWT Subject from one claim and fall back to using the other if it determines it does not

understand the format of the first claim. For example, an implementation may attempt to use "sub_id" and fall back to using "sub" upon finding that "sub_id" contains a Subject Identifier with a format that is not recognized by the implementation.

Below are non-normative examples of JWTs containing the JWT "sub_id" Claim:

```
{
  "iss": "issuer.example.com",
  "sub_id": {
    "format": "email",
    "email": "user@example.com"
  }
}
```

Figure 14: Example: JWT Containing a JWT "sub_id" Claim and No "sub" Claim

```
{
  "iss": "issuer.example.com",
  "sub": "user@example.com",
  "sub_id": {
    "format": "email",
    "email": "user@example.com"
  }
}
```

Figure 15: Example: JWT Where the JWT "sub" and "sub_id" Claims Identify the JWT Subject Using the Same Identifier

```
{
  "iss": "issuer.example.com",
  "sub": "liz@example.com",
  "sub_id": {
    "format": "email",
    "email": "elizabeth@example.com"
  }
}
```

Figure 16: Example: JWT Where the JWT "sub" and "sub_id" Claims Identify the JWT Subject Using Different Values of the Same Identifier Type

```
{
  "iss": "issuer.example.com",
  "sub": "user@example.com",
  "sub_id": {
    "format": "account",
    "uri": "acct:example.user@service.example.com"
  }
}
```

Figure 17: Example: JWT Where the JWT "sub" and "sub_id" Claims Identify the JWT Subject via Different Types of Identifiers

4.2. JWT "sub_id" Claim and "iss_sub" Subject Identifier

The JWT "sub_id" Claim **MAY** contain an "iss_sub" Subject Identifier. In this case, the JWT's "iss" Claim and the Subject Identifier's "iss" member **MAY** be different. For example, an [OpenID Connect \[OpenID.Core\]](#) client may construct such a JWT when sending JWTs back to its OpenID Connect Identity Provider in order to identify the JWT Subject using an identifier known to be understood by both parties. Similarly, the JWT's "sub" Claim and the Subject Identifier's "sub" member **MAY** be different. For example, this may be used by an OpenID Connect client to communicate the JWT Subject's local identifier at the client back to its Identity Provider.

Below are non-normative examples of a JWT where the JWT "iss" Claim and "iss" member within the JWT "sub_id" Claim are the same and a JWT where they are different.

```
{
  "iss": "issuer.example.com",
  "sub_id": {
    "format": "iss_sub",
    "iss": "issuer.example.com",
    "sub": "example_user"
  }
}
```

Figure 18: Example: JWT with an "iss_sub" Subject Identifier Where the JWT Issuer and JWT Subject Issuer Are the Same

```
{
  "iss": "client.example.com",
  "sub_id": {
    "format": "iss_sub",
    "iss": "issuer.example.com",
    "sub": "example_user"
  }
}
```

Figure 19: Example: JWT with an "iss_sub" Subject Identifier Where the JWT Issuer and JWT Subject Issuer Are Different

```
{
  "iss": "client.example.com",
  "sub": "client_user",
  "sub_id": {
    "format": "iss_sub",
    "iss": "issuer.example.com",
    "sub": "example_user"
  }
}
```

Figure 20: Example: JWT with an "iss_sub" Subject Identifier Where the JWT "iss" and "sub" Claims Differ from the JWT Subject's "iss" and "sub" Members

5. Considerations for Specifications that Define Identifier Formats

Identifier Format definitions **MUST NOT** make assertions or declarations regarding the subject being identified by the Subject Identifier (e.g., an Identifier Format cannot be defined as specifically identifying human end users). Such statements are outside the scope of Identifier Formats and Subject Identifiers. Expanding that scope for some Identifier Formats but not others would harm interoperability because applications that depend on this expanded scope to disambiguate the subject type would be unable to use Identifier Formats that do not provide such rules.

6. Privacy Considerations

6.1. Identifier Correlation

The act of presenting two or more identifiers for a single subject together (e.g., within an "aliases" Subject Identifier or via the JWT "sub" and "sub_id" Claims) may communicate more information about the subject than was intended. For example, the entity to which the identifiers are presented now knows that both identifiers relate to the same subject and may be able to correlate additional data based on that. When transmitting Subject Identifiers, the transmitter **SHOULD** take care that they are only transmitting multiple identifiers together when it is known

that the recipient already knows that the identifiers are related (e.g., because they were previously sent to the recipient as claims in an OpenID Connect ID Token) or when correlation is essential to the use case. Implementers must consider such risks, and specifications that use Subject Identifiers must provide appropriate privacy considerations of their own.

The considerations described in [Section 6](#) of [RFC8417] also apply when Subject Identifiers are used within SETs. The considerations described in [Section 12](#) of [RFC7519] also apply when Subject Identifiers are used within JWTs.

7. Security Considerations

This specification does not define any mechanism for ensuring the confidentiality or integrity of a Subject Identifier. Where such properties are required, implementations **MUST** use mechanisms provided by the containing format (e.g., integrity protecting SETs or JWTs using JSON Web Signature (JWS) [RFC7515]) or at the transport layer or other layer in the application stack (e.g., using TLS [RFC8446]).

Further considerations regarding confidentiality and integrity of SETs can be found in [Section 5.1](#) of [RFC8417].

8. IANA Considerations

8.1. Security Event Identifier Formats Registry

This document defines Identifier Formats, for which IANA has created and maintains a new registry titled "Security Event Identifier Formats". Initial values for the "Security Event Identifier Formats" registry are given in [Section 3](#). Future assignments are to be made through the Specification Required registration policy [BCP26] and shall follow the template presented in [Section 8.1.1](#).

It is suggested that multiple designated experts be appointed who are able to represent the perspectives of different applications using this specification in order to enable broadly informed review of registration decisions.

8.1.1. Registration Template

Format Name:

The name of the Identifier Format, as described in [Section 3](#). The name **MUST** be an ASCII string consisting only of lowercase characters ("a" - "z"), digits ("0" - "9"), underscores ("_"), and hyphens ("-") and **SHOULD NOT** exceed 20 characters in length.

Format Description:

A brief description of the Identifier Format.

Change Controller:

For formats defined in documents published by the IETF or its working groups, list "IETF". For all other formats, list the name of the party responsible for the registration. Contact information, such as mailing address, email address, or phone number, must also be provided.

Reference:

A reference to the document or documents that define the Identifier Format. The reference document(s) **MUST** specify the name, format, and meaning of each member that may occur within a Subject Identifier of the defined format as well as whether each member is optional, required, or conditional and the circumstances under which these optional or conditional fields would be used. URIs that can be used to retrieve copies of each document **SHOULD** be included.

8.1.2. Initial Registry Contents**8.1.2.1. Account Identifier Format**

Format Name: account

Format Description: Subject Identifier based on "acct" URI

Change Controller: IETF

Reference: [Section 3](#) of RFC 9493

8.1.2.2. Email Identifier Format

Format Name: email

Format Description: Subject Identifier based on an email address

Change Controller: IETF

Reference: [Section 3](#) of RFC 9493

8.1.2.3. Issuer and Subject Identifier Format

Format Name: iss_sub

Format Description: Subject Identifier based on an issuer and subject

Change Controller: IETF

Reference: [Section 3](#) of RFC 9493

8.1.2.4. Opaque Identifier Format

Format Name: opaque

Format Description: Subject Identifier based on an opaque string

Change Controller: IETF

Reference: [Section 3](#) of RFC 9493

8.1.2.5. Phone Number Identifier Format

Format Name: phone_number

Format Description: Subject Identifier based on a phone number

Change Controller: IETF

Reference: [Section 3](#) of RFC 9493

8.1.2.6. Decentralized Identifier Format

Format Name: did

Format Description: Subject Identifier based on a decentralized identifier (DID)

Change Controller: IETF

Reference: [Section 3](#) of RFC 9493

8.1.2.7. Uniform Resource Identifier Format

Format Name: uri

Format Description: Subject Identifier based on a Uniform Resource Identifier (URI)

Change Controller: IETF

Reference: [Section 3](#) of RFC 9493

8.1.2.8. Aliases Identifier Format

Format Name: aliases

Format Description: Subject Identifier that groups together multiple different Subject Identifiers for the same subject

Change Controller: IETF

Reference: [Section 3](#) of RFC 9493

8.1.3. Guidance for Expert Reviewers

The Expert Reviewer is expected to review the documentation referenced in a registration request to verify its completeness. The Expert Reviewer must base their decision to accept or reject the request on a fair and impartial assessment of the request. If the Expert Reviewer has a conflict of interest, such as being an author of a defining document referenced by the request, they must recuse themselves from the approval process for that request.

Identifier Formats need not be generally applicable and may be highly specific to a particular domain; it is expected that formats may be registered for niche or industry-specific use cases. The Expert Reviewer should focus on whether the format is thoroughly documented and whether its registration will promote or harm interoperability. In most cases, the Expert Reviewer should not approve a request if the registration would contribute to confusion or amount to a synonym for an existing format.

8.2. JSON Web Token Claims Registration

This document defines the JWT "sub_id" Claim, which IANA has registered in the "JSON Web Token Claims" registry [[IANA.JWT.Claims](#)] established by [[RFC7519](#)].

8.2.1. Registry Contents

Claim Name: sub_id

Claim Description: Subject Identifier

Change Controller: IETF

Reference: [Section 4.1](#) of RFC 9493

9. References

9.1. Normative References

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Authors' Addresses

Annabelle Backman (EDITOR)

Amazon

Email: richanna@amazon.com

Marius Scurtescu

Coinbase

Email: marius.scurtescu@coinbase.com

Prachi Jain

Fastly

Email: prachi.jain1288@gmail.com