Making Lithium Energy Storage Systems Bulletproof to Prevent Thermal Runaway

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Explore the risks and consequences of bullet penetration in large-scale lithium-ion battery systems. Learn how impact factors like battery design and location can trigger thermal runaway and create hazardous situations.

This webpage QR code

PDF Version of the webpage (maximum 10 pages)

What Happens If a Bullet Penetrates a Large-Scale Lithium Battery Pack?

When a lithium-ion battery pack, especially on a large-scale energy storage system, is penetrated by a bullet, the risks and consequences depend on several factors, including the specific battery design, the location of the impact, and the size of the battery system. The situation can be particularly hazardous due to the high energy density of lithium-ion batteries and their potential for thermal runaway. Below is a detailed analysis of what may occur:

1. Immediate Physical Effects of the Penetration

Internal Short Circuit
• When a bullet penetrates a lithium battery, it can damage internal components such as:
• Electrodes (anode and cathode).
• Electrolyte layers (usually a flammable liquid).
• Separators, which prevent direct contact between the anode and cathode.
• The penetration may cause an internal short circuit, allowing a rapid, uncontrolled flow of current within the battery.

Heat Generation
• The short circuit causes localized heat generation at the point of penetration. This heat can quickly raise the temperature of the battery cell, possibly exceeding the thermal threshold.

Sparking
• If the bullet is made of a conductive material (e.g., copper or lead), it can create sparks by completing unintended electrical circuits, further increasing the risk of ignition.

2. Potential Outcomes

Thermal Runaway
• Once a cell is damaged and overheats, it can enter a state of thermal runaway, where:
• The electrolyte decomposes and releases flammable gases like hydrogen, methane, and ethylene.
• Neighboring cells heat up and undergo the same reaction, leading to a cascading failure throughout the battery pack.
• Temperatures can exceed 1,000°C (1,800°F).

Fire
• Flammable gases released from the electrolyte can ignite, leading to intense fires that are difficult to extinguish.
• A lithium fire can produce toxic fumes, such as hydrogen fluoride (HF) and carbon monoxide (CO), posing risks to nearby personnel.

Explosion
• In some cases, the buildup of flammable gases and pressure inside the battery casing can lead to explosions.
• The rapid expansion of gases and release of energy can cause shrapnel-like damage, increasing the risk to surrounding areas.

Localized Damage
• If the penetration is limited to one part of the battery pack, the damage may remain localized. However, large-scale battery systems are often densely packed, increasing the likelihood of the reaction spreading.

3. Factors Influencing the Severity of the Incident