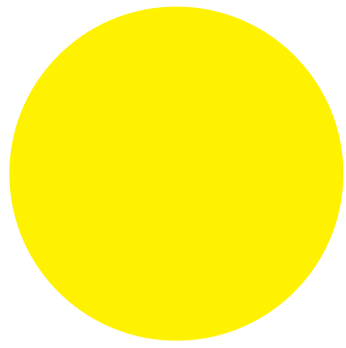


Minister calls for national, global recognition of Minab tragedy

8 >



# Iran Daily

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## Iran oil crunch months away despite Trump's claim, data shows

3 >

INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE



Role of Iran's land borders in nullifying maritime blockades

4 >



World Snooker Championship: Vafaei launches epic comeback to stun world No 1 Trump

6 >



Iran launches emergency restoration of war-damaged historical sites

7 >

FEATURE REPORT EXCLUSIVE



Iran keeps postal services running amid war damage

8 >

## Iran: US-Israeli strikes erode core principles of int'l system

Washington suffering from 'maniacal hubris'

2 >



SCO defense ministers pose for a group photo during a meeting in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan on April 28, 2026. AKIPRESS

### How boundaries of performative madness collapsed in Trump-Iran case



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OPINION EXCLUSIVE

In the literature of international politics, the "Madman Theory" has been regarded as one of the most controversial tools of deterrence; a tool grounded in the assumption that a political leader can moderate an adversary's behavior by projecting a controlled image of instability, or even madness. The roots of this idea trace back to the Cold War, particularly to Henry Kissinger's interpretations of Richard Nixon's conduct, where unpredictability was defined as a strategic asset rather than a flaw. However, Donald Trump's experience — particularly in relation to Iran and in the context of the recent war — has pushed this theoretical framework into a stage of conceptual ambiguity. The issue is no longer merely the use of a performance of madness as an instrument, but rather the

gradual collapse of the distinction between performance and reality; a point at which what was meant to be a political role turns into a durable feature of political action itself.

In analyses published by the New York Review and similar commentaries, it has been highlighted that Trump, in deploying threatening rhetoric — from warnings about the "destruction of civilizations" to direct threats issued on his social media platform — is moving beyond the controlled boundaries of the classical theory. In Thomas Schelling's model, a threat is effective when it generates controlled risk; that is, when the opposing side rationally considers the possibility of a limited catastrophe. But in Trump's case, that risk has shifted from an instrument into a permanent perceptual environment.

As a result, instead of "strategic ambiguity," what emerges is a form of "structural ambiguity"; an ambiguity no longer subject to calibration, but one that has become a fixed feature of the decision-making environment. This is precisely the point Robert Jer-

vis warned about: when messages become excessively contradictory or emotionally charged, the opposing actor is no longer able to interpret strategic intent, and the entire logic of deterrence begins to erode. In the Iran case, this shift has had concrete implications. Throughout the recent war, Iran followed a relatively classical pattern of limited deterrence — namely controlled, phased and predictable responses. On the other side, however, US behavior at the discursive and media level has drifted away from the logic of classical deterrence and moved toward the continuous production of personalized uncertainty.

The crucial point is that in the classical Madman Theory, as Kissinger emphasized, madness must be believable yet bounded. The adversary must believe an explosion is possible, while at the same time understanding that such an explosion remains under relative control. But in Trump's conduct, particularly during his second term and amid the Iran crisis, that limitation has gradually faded.

Here, the concept of self-referential escalation

can be invoked: a condition in which repeated severe threats not only fail to generate deterrent effects, but also lead to the weakening of the threat's credibility. Even in Trump's own historical examples — from threatening North Korea with "fire and fury" to later declaring "mutual love" with Kim Jong Un — a pattern of diminishing returns in credibility can be observed.

But the deeper point is that Trump is not merely "playing a role." Accounts from former officials in his administration, including John Kelly, James Mattis and John Bolton, suggest that a significant part of this conduct is not performative but behavioral and personal. This is the point at which analysis shifts from the level of "strategic theory" to that of the "psycho-political structure of power."

Within this framework, the Madman Theory is inverted. What was meant to be a tool becomes a situation. And what was supposed to be an exceptional situation turns into the ordinary logic of political action.

This condition can also be explained through a Hobbesian reading of power. In

Leviathan, Thomas Hobbes describes rage and grandiosity as potential roots of political madness; a condition in which an individual substitutes belief in an inner truth for external constraints. Under such circumstances, reality is no longer an external reference point, but becomes a function of the will to power.

As a result, what is being observed in the case of Trump and Iran is not merely a diplomatic or military crisis, but a crisis in the perception of international politics itself. Deterrence is no longer shaped solely by military capability or official signaling; it is also being redefined through perceptions of the stability or instability of the political leader's personality.

In sum, the Madman Theory has undergone a fundamental transformation in the Trump experience: from a controlled strategy for managing enemy perceptions into a permanent condition of uncertainty. In this condition, the boundary between threat, performance and reality collapses — and that collapse itself becomes one of the principal variables of instability in US-Iran relations.

