

MALAYSIAN PALM OIL SECTOR DURING THE ISRAEL AND UNITED STATES-IRAN CONFLICT (FEBRUARY–APRIL 2026): A CONTENT ANALYSIS APPROACH OF THE MEDIA FRAMING

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ABSTRACT

This study examines media narratives on the Malaysian palm oil industry published from 28 February to 20 April 2026 during the intensified conflict involving the United States (US), Israel, and Iran. The study identified five main themes through an assessment of 487 news articles, editorials, and opinion pieces published in English and Malay by private and government-linked media organisations. The study used a structured coding framework to assess the themes, and the findings revealed statistics such as economic implications (43.1%), political stance (27.7%), national security (16.4%), sustainability impact (8.6%) and humanitarian aspect (4.1%). Government-linked media houses often depict stability and assure the public that the situation is under control and the government is working on the issue. The language affiliated/used by media houses also showed slight differences, with the English media focused more on financial analysis and global market trends, while the Malay media outlets discussed more about community concerns such as food security, livelihoods, and national sovereignty. Overall, the media portrayed palm oil as an essential national commodity that contributes significantly to the nation, despite trade disruptions caused by the conflict. This study informs readers how media capture and narrate news in ways that may influence society at large. Therefore, managing communication is as important as devising financial and business strategies in this critical era.

Keywords: commodity markets, content analysis, geopolitical conflict, media framing, palm oil.

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INTRODUCTION

As the world's second-largest palm oil producer, Malaysia relies heavily on the commodity

for many communities' livelihoods and for its contribution to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Wulandari & Sholihin, 2026). Therefore, the country is vulnerable to economic shocks in any part of the world (Alatas, 2021; Nesadurai, 2025). Geopolitical tensions and conflicts, even when geographically distant from Malaysia, can still produce ripple effects. Hence, these elements are captured and discussed frequently in various platforms of media discourse (Chi et al., 2025). When the article was written, the conflict between Israel and the US versus Iran was still ongoing, albeit in a ceasefire situation. The escalation reached its peak between February and April 2026, when Iran closed the Strait of

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Hormuz. As a result, serious disruptions affected international supply chains and energy prices. This caused price volatility and uncertainty for commodities such as palm oil, leading to various economic and social perceptions and operational reaction to the commodity-dependent nations (Prayoga et al., 2024).

Previous studies have examined the economic and political importance of palm oil, as well as media framing exercises due to geopolitical tensions (Nesadurai, 2025; Zaklama, 2025). However, the media portrayal of the country's palm oil sector is rarely discussed (Müller-Bloch & Kranz, 2015).

Originating from the Media Framing Theory, through the framing process (Almakaty, 2025), a better understanding of the geopolitical context by the public, government, and market participants can be achieved and better policy can be formulated (Chin, 2022). Moreover, industry stakeholders will gain insights into managing international trade risk, particularly in the palm oil industry, despite the global turmoil (Marshelli & Suyanto, 2025; Sokhatskyi et al., 2025).

Media Framing Theory

Media framing theory explains the media's ability to shape opinions about a particular issue and generate support for a journalist's intended purpose (Almakaty, 2025; Nuraini et al., 2024; Zaklama, 2025). Framing highlights certain aspects of a perceived situation and subsequently shapes views of the problem, moral judgement, and decision-making (Marshelli & Suyanto, 2025; Zaklama, 2025). Media framing or written narratives, encompasses various spectrums of readers' or audiences' opinions, including narratives and rhetorical content, as well as empirical evidence based on current events (Haj Omar, 2019; Iqbal & Farukh, 2025). Relevant examples can be derived from reports on the current conflict, which the media can project or frame as either getting worse, calmer or de-escalating (Doufesh & Briel, 2021; Nie & Zawawi, 2023). Interestingly, managing the media framing in the context of the commodity market is essential to understanding public and market participants' perceptions and for policy formulation during geopolitical conflict (Chumikov, 2025; Macnamara, 2005).

Media literacy is therefore an important skill, especially for authorities seeking to reduce bias and minimise implications for stakeholders (Ajetunmobi, 2023; Msughter et al., 2023). Therefore, for Malaysia's palm oil sector, it requires the nation to formulate policies and actions that protect the palm oil's interests (Alatas, 2021; Chin, 2022). Thus, this study emphasises journalists'

and media organisations' capacity to interpret and contextualise global events, translating distant conflicts into local relevance and contributing to public and policy reactions (Van den Bulck et al., 2019; Zaklama, 2025).

Conflict and Commodity Markets

Geopolitical conflicts introduce significant volatility and uncertainty into global commodity markets (Nassar, 2024; Zeng, 2024). Chi et al. (2025) concurred that geopolitical crises often disrupt supply chains, generate negative sentiment in capital markets, and alter global demand and supply for commodities, products and services (Chi et al., 2025; Nassar, 2024). The coalition of Israel-US versus Iran conflict, for example, affects oil prices and shipping routes, which in turn influence production and transport costs for other commodities such as palm oil (Chi et al., 2025). Muhamat et al. (2025) compare the situation to the tariff revision imposed by the US on many countries on the pretext of correcting the trade imbalance between the US and them. Nevertheless, the current conflict is worse, as it affects various levels of the supply chain due to serious impacts on global energy, particularly fuel and natural gas production and distribution (Popova, 2020). Likewise, uncertainty that exists due to the situation produces psychological and speculative dilemmas that often causes the commodities' prices, such as palm oil, to be perceived as higher than the actual prices that would otherwise prevail. The news reported by the media has strong potential to either mitigate or amplify the effects according to public perspectives, especially investors (Andini et al., 2025; Macnamara, 2005).

Research Gap and Conceptual Focus

Although considerable research has been conducted on Malaysia's palm oil sector, media framing, and the impact of geopolitical conflicts on commodity markets, a distinct research gap remains (Bulteel et al., 2021; Müller-Bloch & Kranz, 2015). These areas are frequently examined independently (*Figure 1*). For example, while some studies assess the economic and geopolitical relevance of palm oil, few examine how specific international conflicts, such as tensions between Israel and the US against Iran, influence Malaysian media coverage of palm oil (Alatas, 2021; Nesadurai, 2025). Similarly, research on media framing during conflicts generally focuses on the principal parties or directly affected regions, often neglecting the indirect consequences for commodity-producing countries and their major exports (Doufesh & Briel, 2021; Marshelli & Suyanto, 2025).

THE NEXUS OF GEOPOLITICS, MEDIA, AND MARKETS

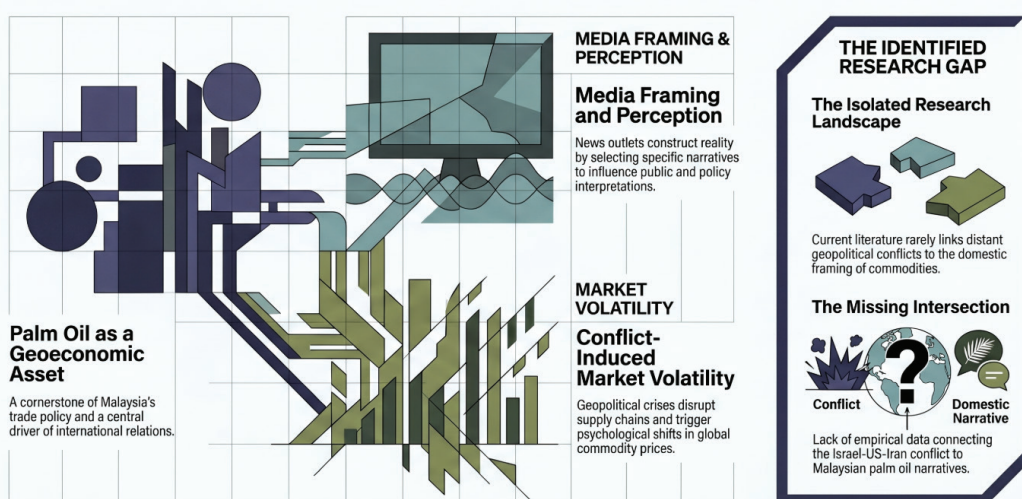


Figure 1. Summary of previous literature and research gap.

While content analysis is a prevalent method in media studies, it is infrequently used to explore how rare geopolitical conflicts shape domestic discussions of nations such as Malaysian palm oil (Sjøvaag & Stavelin, 2012). This study aims to address this gap by directly connecting Malaysia's palm oil sector to media framing arising from the Israel-US versus Iran conflict, thereby offering a novel empirical contribution.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach, supported by descriptive frequency counts to systematically examine Malaysian media's portrayal of the palm oil sector during the Israel-US versus Iran conflict (Manoilo & Strigunov, 2019; Rouhi, 2018). This method enables a detailed interpretive exploration of communication content by identifying nuanced meanings, themes, and framing strategies within the selected media texts (Frasetya et al., 2025).

Specification of media outlets and sampling frame deployed a purposive sampling strategy in a bid to capture a wide range of the media landscape in Malaysia based on two main variables: (1) language (English vs. Malay) and (2) media ownership (government-linked vs. private). The final data collection of 487 samples was accomplished within the stipulated 8-week period between 28 February and 20 April 2026. The media outlets sampled were primary English-language media (The Star and The New Straits Times, and the major online portals such as The Edge). While the Malay language media included Utusan Malaysia, Bernama, Sinar Harian and Harian Metro.

Furthermore, the inclusion criteria are individual news reports and articles or editorials and opinion pieces, written on the Malaysian palm oil sector and the 2026 Israel-US-Iran conflict, which were identified manually. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria are coverage of the Middle East conflict that does not refer to or include palm oil, or routine domestic palm oil news that does not address or include the conflict.

The specific period of analysis spans from 28 February to 20 April 2026, capturing the height of the conflict (when it started). This qualitative approach prioritises understanding the contextual and rhetorical dimensions of media representation, moving beyond mere frequency counts to interpret how narratives are constructed and reinforced (Odoemelum & Hasan, 2021).

Sampling

This study used qualitative content analysis to systematically examine how Malaysian media portrayed the palm oil sector during the Israel-US versus Iran conflict (Manoilo & Strigunov, 2019; Rouhi, 2018). This approach offers a detailed, interpretive look at communication content, helping identify subtle meanings, themes, and framing strategies in the selected media texts (Frasetya et al., 2025). The analysis focuses on the period from 28 February to 20 April 2026, which marks the height of the geopolitical tensions. By using this qualitative method, the study aims to explain the contextual and rhetorical aspects of media representation, going beyond simple frequency counts to interpret how narratives are constructed and reinforced (Odoemelum & Hasan, 2021).

Unit of Analysis

This content analysis used individual news articles, editorials, and opinion pieces as the main units of analysis (Hasyim et al., 2025). Only items that mentioned Malaysia's palm oil sector in connection with the Israel-US versus Iran conflict were included. The reviewed content discussed the conflict's broader economic impact, changes in global commodity markets, or specific issues such as palm oil exports, production, or industry views during periods of international instability. Each media item was coded separately to allow for a detailed look at framing, narrative, and themes (Odoemelum & Hasan, 2021). News or articles that only discussed the conflict without mentioning palm oil or focused on palm oil without linking it to the conflict, were excluded (Karlsson & Sjøvaag, 2016).

Coding Framework

We created a coding framework to identify and organise framing elements in the media content we sampled. The main categories are: (1) Economic implication, which covers references to price changes, export volumes, trade routes, supply chain issues, and financial effects on the industry or national economy. (2) Political stance, which includes statements about government policy, international relations, trade diplomacy, national sovereignty, or alliances in response to the conflict. (3) Sustainability discourse, discussions about the environmental or social aspects of palm oil, especially when linked to conflicts or international perspectives. (4) National security, includes discussions of food and energy security, as well as the strategic role of palm oil in maintaining the country's stability during times of geopolitical tension. Lastly, (5) Geopolitical context, covers broader discussions that link palm oil to regional

or international power dynamics shaped by the conflict. Each category has sub-codes to add detail and help capture the full range of framing nuances (Frasetya et al., 2025).

Reliability

To enhance trustworthiness, we implemented intercoder reliability procedures. Approximately 10% of the items were independently coded using the same framework and decision rules. Coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved, leading to updates to the codebook. Cohen's kappa was then calculated to assess agreement; values greater than 0.80 indicate strong reliability. Trustworthiness was further strengthened by clearly defining categories and consistently applying inclusion criteria. These procedures ensure that observed differences across outlets reflect genuine variations in framing rather than selection artefacts. *Table 1* demonstrates the steps of the reliability framework.

Limitations

This study acknowledges several methodological limitations, while noting that they do not undermine the reliability of the findings. Although the chosen timeframe, 28 February to 20 April 2026, was relatively brief, it captured critical aspects of the conflict at its most intense stage. Having said that, the study does not indicate whether changes happened in the long run (Müller-Bloch & Kranz, 2015). To reiterate, that is not the aim of this study.

Furthermore, the selected news outlets represent a relatively small sample, although they cover mainstream media outlets. In terms of concerns, some of the news sentiments in other languages such as Mandarin and Tamil were not selected due to our inability to comprehend the languages. Also, since the data was analysed manually instead of

TABLE 1. STEPS OF RELIABILITY FRAMEWORK

No.	Methodological dimension	Operational Steps	References
1.	Media Content Analysis	Systematic textual breakdown	Sjøvaag & Stavelin (2012) discussed the validation of digital and print media.
2.	Dual-Coder Framework	2 Coders	Akhmedov et al. (2021) provided dual-coding procedures for the categorisation of media content
3.	Pilot Sample Size	n = 49% (10.06%)	Frasetya et al. (2025) suggested 10% as the standard empirical benchmark for pilot reliability testing in communication research.
4.	Discrepancy Resolution	Negotiated Consensus	Odoemelum & Hasan (2021) discussed the negotiated agreement to refine coding categories and remove coder drift.
5.	Intercoder Dimension	K = 0.85% (minimum 0.80%)	Landis & Koch (1977) referred to Cohen (1960) on K > 0.80% as the standard for substantial/almost perfect intercoder agreement.

using software or system, there is a possibility of error; however, this issue has been addressed by including two researchers to examine the data as per the dual-coder process. Nevertheless, this study has covered the essential media, which were in Malay (the national language) and English (a language that is widely spoken in the business sector).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Results

The findings show that media coverage from 28 February to 20 April 2026 channelled several themes concerning the palm oil sector in relation to the geopolitical conflict. Most media narratives focused on economic implications, political stance, national security, sustainability and humanitarian aspects (*Table 2*).

The economic implication narrative concerns palm oil price volatility caused by the conflict, logistical disruptions, and effects on palm oil export earnings (Chi et al., 2025; Nassar, 2024). Political stance frequently discusses the diplomatic steps taken by the government to safeguard the trading relationship while at the same time emphasising Malaysia's non-aligned stance (Chin, 2022). The security aspect derived from palm oil's earnings to Malaysia as an important commodity that is vulnerable to externalities (Bushuev, 2025).

Views Comparison

Media language affiliation, whether English or Malay, and ownership type, whether private or government-linked, were associated with different approaches. The English-language publication house, such as The Star, emphasises an international setting comprising market trend analysis, global diplomatic-economic impacts and practitioners' opinions on palm oil in the form of market indices and regional projections (Chi et al., 2025). In contrast, the Malay-language media such as Utusan Malaysia focused more on the Malaysians' social and economic effects of the conflict over palm oil. They highlighted issues facing smallholders such as lack of capital for replanting the old trees (SME Asia,

2025), crop diseases (Annuar, 2025) and extreme weather (Thompson et al., 2023), to name a few and concerns about national food security. These outlets often describe political actions in terms of national pride and sovereignty, linking government decisions to the protection of local livelihoods. Malay media used the national security frame more often, stressing the importance of palm oil for the country's stability and independence. Bernama, as one of the reputable government-affiliated outlets, often focused on the stability that the government has provided despite the challenges. The published news focused on the government's steps and formulated strategies to address the impacts brought by the conflict, and the reports often in the mood of pacification and calmness towards the pressures globally (Chin, 2022). Likewise, private media adopts more critical views of the strategies taken to safeguard the palm oil industry. It clearly denotes the differences in approach and targeted readers and listeners (Huang & Leung, 2005).

Narrative Patterns

Media coverage revealed several main narrative patterns that influenced how the public viewed Malaysia's palm oil sector during the conflict. One common narrative described palm oil as a "resilient commodity," able to withstand global challenges because of steady demand and Malaysia's strong market position. This view often emphasised the industry's ability to adapt and pointed to ongoing efforts to find new markets or improve product value (Alam et al., 2022; Nesadurai, 2025).

Another important narrative focused on palm oil's vulnerability to sanctions and trade disruptions. This perspective highlighted possible increases in shipping costs, insurance premiums, or direct trade restrictions as the conflict escalated (Chi et al., 2025). It often raised concerns about fragile global supply chains and how instability in the Middle East could indirectly affect commodity markets far away (Nassar, 2024).

A third strong narrative portrayed palm oil as a symbol of "national pride and economic sovereignty." This view often connected the industry to Malaysia's development successes and its ability to pursue an independent foreign policy

TABLE 2. REVIEWED FREQUENCY OF MEDIA FRAMES

Frame category	Frequency (n = 487 articles)	Percentage (%)
Economic implication	210	43.1
Political stance	135	27.7
National security	80	16.4
Sustainability impact	42	8.6
Humanitarian aspects	20	4.1

(Alatas, 2021). It emphasised how the industry adds to national wealth and helps Malaysia assert its economic independence internationally, especially when facing outside pressure or criticism.

These narratives often overlapped, showing the complex and sometimes conflicting challenges the industry faces. Media sources regularly balanced stories of resilience with warnings about vulnerability, while consistently stressing the importance of palm oil to Malaysia's national identity and economic stability.

Visual Aids

Media coverage often used visual aids like charts showing commodity price changes or maps of affected trade routes to reinforce key themes. For instance, line graphs comparing crude palm oil (CPO) prices with global oil benchmarks were frequently included to show the conflict's economic impact. These graphics appeared in articles about market volatility or inflation risks, making complex economic data easier for readers to understand (Chi et al., 2025).

Infographics showing where Malaysia exports palm oil or its production numbers highlighted the industry's global importance. Maps of major shipping routes, especially through the Strait of Hormuz and other critical points, made concerns about trade disruptions and national security more visible. Articles often included photos of Malaysian palm oil plantations or industry leaders, which supported the idea of national pride. These visuals played a key role in shaping how the stories were framed and how audiences understood them.

Contextualisation

Economic implications and political stance are the main themes in Malaysian media discussions of the palm oil sector during the Israel-US versus Iran conflict. By focusing on economic data, the media show a national concern for keeping stability in this important export industry, linking far-off geopolitical events to Malaysia's own economic health (Nassar, 2024). This matches earlier studies showing that geo-economic conflicts require flexible marketing strategies and risk management in global markets (Sokhatskyi et al., 2025). The analysis also shows that who owns the media and the language they use affects how these themes are presented. Government-linked media used certain frames to reassure people and emphasise national resilience. In contrast, private and Malay-language outlets focused more on local impacts and national identity (Huang & Leung, 2005). These differences highlight how state messaging, public interests, and various media goals interact to shape national stories during crises.

The idea of palm oil as a "resilient commodity" and a source of "national pride" helps boost confidence and shows strength in the face of external threats. These stories can reduce panic and encourage unity (Nie & Zawawi, 2023). On the other hand, the "vulnerable to sanctions" theme warns stakeholders of potential issues and underscores the need for proactive policies. In general, the media frames these issues strategically to shape opinions, protect economic interests, and strengthen national identity in a changing global context (Alatas, 2021).

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study examined media narratives on the impact of the intense conflict involving Israel, the US, and Iran on Malaysian palm oil from 28 February to 20 April 2026 (although the situation is now under a ceasefire while this article was written). Findings indicate that the media coverage focused on several themes, which are economic implications, political stance and national security. The media also emphasised the government's role in stabilising the commodity through trade diplomacy and framing geopolitical instability as an economic risk to palm oil. Moreover, palm oil is always depicted as a national strategic commodity and the differences between the English and Malay media outlets, as well as the private and government-linked media houses, have their own priorities in news reporting.

Earlier discussions have highlighted that media framing is essential for projecting the government's efforts during the current energy crisis and for pacifying the public about its side effects. Likewise, a specific assessment of palm oil in public perception showed that the narrative is that the palm oil supply is stable for the local market, albeit with challenges due to the high cost of fertiliser resulting from the closure of the Hormuz Strait. Another message being sent to the public is that demand for palm oil is increasing due to concerns in the traditional market.

This research suggests several directions for future study that can bring more useful findings for decision-making. In addition to the current research's scope, future studies can include other major palm oil producers, such as Indonesia or Thailand. Based on the same method, media coverage of the impacts on the two countries' palm oil sector due to the conflict between Israel and the US versus Iran can be framed. From the comparison, we can note the media influence on public opinion in those countries as well as their governments' strategies and intervention. Likewise, future research could also assess various groups in Malaysia, such as smallholders, big plantations, refineries and others, on their responses to the geopolitical conflict.

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