



**WINNER OF THE TOP CZECH LITERARY AWARD
READERS' CHOICE (2019)**



ARGO HIGHLIGHTS **NON-FICTION**

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

The Story of Gaza

by **Jakub Szántó**



A powerful report on the country and its people, straight from the conflict zone

Gaza – a place where ancient empires and biblical legends meet the brutal realities of today's frontline tragedies. Always a crossroads of history, its name became a global symbol of suffering, resilience, and unresolved conflict after October 7, 2023.

Award-winning journalist and historian Jakub Szántó brings together two decades of experience in the Middle East, blending deep historical research with gripping reportage and intimate human stories. Filled with maps, photographs, and firsthand testimonies, this book reveals the complex, layered reality of Gaza. Neutral yet compassionate, it cuts through noise and prejudice with clarity and empathy. A timely and unforgettable read for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of Gaza.

"A powerful and timely book that tackles a sensitive topic and will not leave any discerning reader indifferent in today's turbulent times."

— *Reflex*

Jakub Szántó (b. 1977) is a journalist and television reporter with a Doctorate in Modern History from Charles University in Prague. He has covered numerous international crises for television, focusing primarily on the Middle East and Africa. Szántó has received the **Open Society Fund Prague Journalism Award (2014)** and the **Ferdinand Peroutka Award for journalism (2017)**. Drawing on over twenty years of reporting – including five years as a permanent Middle East correspondent – he has authored *Behind the Curtain of War* (winner of the **Magnesia Litera Readers' Choice Award, 2019**) and *From Isratine with Love*, offering an unorthodox perspective on Israeli and Palestinian peoples – their lifestyles, cultures, and histories. Together with Czech TV correspondents, he co-wrote *Pu-tin's War*, a unique chronicle of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.



English summary

Since the dawn of written history, Gaza has stood at the crossroads of civilizations. Ancient Egyptians fought Babylonians and Persians over it. The Bible describes it as the seat of the Philistines, who battled the Hebrews—whose legendary hero Samson fought his ultimate battle here. Alexander the Great laid siege to the city, while Roman general Marcus Anthony gave it as a wedding gift to Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt. According to tradition, it is also the burial place of the great-grandfather of the Islamic prophet Mohamed. Muslim armies clashed with Crusaders here, later the Ottomans and Brits during WWI—eventually giving way to the modern struggle between Arabs and Israelis.

Gaza—especially since October 7, 2023—has become a global symbol of human suffering and wartime destruction, as well as of enduring Arab-Israeli enmity. It has gripped the focus and stirred the emotions of millions, become a topic of endless discussion and online debate, influenced policies of countries far removed from the ongoing conflict. Yet for all the attention, the region's history, the roots of the turmoil, and the lives, culture, and motivations of its people in Gaza remain elusive to most.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Story of Gaza offers a compelling account and a valuable contribution to the surprisingly limited number of international titles focused explicitly on Gaza. It combines deep research of historical and oral sources with firsthand knowledge and on-the-ground experience. The author, Jakub Szántó, a recipient of some of the most prestigious journalism awards, holds a doctorate in Modern History from Charles University in Prague. Over the past twenty-five years, he has worked across the Middle East, with a consistent focus on Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel. The bestselling author of two previous books on the region, Szántó now presents a unique exploration of Gaza's history, geography, politics, culture, economy, and daily life. His characteristically rich and gripping style blends factual analysis with the personal and family stories of those who have shaped—and been shaped by—Gazan history.

While the book focuses on Gaza and its Palestinian inhabitants and rulers, it upholds the best journalistic traditions: neutrality, humanity, and respect. In the context of the ongoing and heated discourse surrounding the war between Israel and Hamas, this

work—featuring historical and contemporary maps as well as photographs from the author’s extensive archive—has sparked significant discussion in the Czech Republic.

Foreword (Jordan Haj)

Jordan Haj, a Czech musician and filmmaker with Arab and Israeli roots, recalls his childhood in Israel. He speaks about life between Jewish and Arab cultures, the constant search for identity, and how he was shaped by growing up both in a kibbutz and among his Arab relatives. He describes everyday life in Israeli society full of differences, prejudices, and humor. He admits he has never felt fully Israeli or fully Palestinian, calling himself instead “an ultra-humanist.” The foreword highlights the personal dimension of the conflict and draws the reader into the book’s atmosphere.

Introduction

Szántó returns to Gaza in 2014 after the end of one of the wars. He captures an absurd contrast—children playing in a leaking water hose while the city lies in ruins and people struggle to survive without electricity and water. He recounts Gaza’s history as a place that has seen empires, wars, and devastation but has always risen from the ashes. He explains the region’s geographical and cultural significance and why Gaza has become a “city caught between the millstones” of Israel and Palestine.

Chapter One – Stories of Three Young People (after October 7, 2023)

The author recounts the day of October 7, 2023, when Hamas launched a massive attack on Israel. In this chapter we follow:

Razan from Gaza – a young woman facing bombings, evacuations, loss of home and livelihood. She describes how her family repeatedly fled south, how she started a fundraising campaign to reach Canada with her partner, and how she survives in camps under inhumane conditions.

Gideon from Israel – a former soldier who returns to service after the attacks. He recounts the chaotic days after the assault, the mobilization of reservists, the sense of threat, and the life of a soldier confronting not only the enemy but also his own anxiety.

Other stories (hinted at in the text, with the chapter later expanding to a third perspective—probably from the West Bank, though it was not fully developed in the excerpt). All these stories show that on both sides of the border there are people who suffer and long for safety.

Historical Chapters (maps and context)

Interwoven among the personal stories are historical overviews accompanied by maps:

the evolution of the region from antiquity through Roman and Byzantine times, Ottoman rule and its decline, the partitioning of the Middle East by the British-French Sykes–Picot Agreement, the 1947

UN Partition Plan for Palestine and the ensuing 1948–1949 war, the Six-Day War of 1967 and subsequent border changes, and the division of Palestinian territories after the Oslo Accords (Gaza under Hamas, the West Bank divided into various administrative zones).

Grants for publishing Czech literature abroad

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