

Skaters of Beirut

An ethnographic essay on play in an insecure city

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How is play accomplished in insecure urban contexts? In this ethnographic essay, I analyse the ways Beirut's skateboarders make sense of the risks and dangers in their city arising from war, political unrest and hazardous streets. The essay is based on my experience of skating in Beirut, as well as on two interviews with skateboarders Ian and Karam. Departing from the view of skateboarding as a city craft, I enter into dialogue with theories of play, fun, and risk-taking to understand the meanings of skateboarding in a volatile urban environment. I show that skateboarders transform disruptive events into opportunities for play through acts of noticing and un-noticing. By noticing absence of security guards, skateboarders may approach otherwise inaccessible spots, facilitating the redefinition of the city into a space for play. Through absorption in play, skaters can also partially turn signs of war into no-things, diminishing their significance. However, play's potential to alleviate the hardships af-

fecting Beirut's residents should not be exaggerated; like securitisation of city space, imposed military violence ultimately restricts freedom of movement in the city, and can at times disrupt play. In addition to expanding our theoretical understanding of play in insecure contexts, the essay gives an empirical contribution by tracing the entanglements of skateboarding in Beirut with the socio-political context of Lebanon.

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Go Skate Day

It is June 21, 2026, and a crowd of about 30 skaters has gathered at Marble, a street spot in Beirut. Located in proximity to al-Amin Mosque – an impressive building with characteristic, sky-blue domes – the Marble spot is an elevated brick square with a large tree in the centre. The latter provides shadow for some of the boys and the few girls who are sitting on the concrete benches or on their boards chatting. Stairs in various heights surround the square, varying from one step at the lowest side to seven at the highest. With relatively calm traffic around us, perhaps due to it being Sunday, the stairs are fairly safe to skate without risking getting hit by a car. Two cement blocks torn from skating are used as ledges to grind; one of them is tilted down the steps, the other is lying horizontally on the sidewalk below. When I arrive, the more senior skaters are busy skating the latter, lining up at the end of the sidewalk to take turns on the ledge.

It is mid-day, the weather is hot and humid, typical of Beirut summers. The crowd has gathered for Go Skate Day, an annual world-wide event founded in 2003. The Instagram account Skate Beirut announced the event through a post. A poster-like picture depicts a male skater with a *keffiyeh* wrapped around his head, riding a flying missile over a dystopic, war-torn landscape: TODAY WE SKATE FOR THE SOUTH, FOR GAZA, FOR OUR PEOPLE, FOR THE DISPLACED SKATERS OF LEBANON, the post reads. In the background, a sign declares: THE SOUTH RESISTS AND STAYS.

Around 2 PM, an Israeli drone appears over Beirut. While not possible to see, a loud propeller noise communicates its presence. The skaters at Marble do not pay attention to the drone and, as far as I notice, do not comment on it. The energy is vibrant, and people continue to arrive. Some play a game of S.K.A.T.E,¹ some are filming lines with flip tricks and grinds on the sidewalk ledge, while others are watching or talking in the shade. One of the most skilful skaters is making attempts at a 360 flip over a large gap, a bush-covered section at the square's high end. For each try he runs over a couple of meters of dirt, jumps on his board when reaching the brick ground, rolls for some short seconds, then charges over the bushes. Two people are filming the attempts. Another is acting as spotter, preventing the skater and his board to hit the closely parked cars. In this hyped-up atmosphere, the drone is easily disregarded.

1 A game in which two or more skaters take turns on tricks that the other(s) need to repeat. A failed attempt to repeat a trick entails a letter – S, K, A, T and E. The skater who gives the competitor(s) five letters wins.

Skating in an insecure city

This essay is about skateboarding in Beirut. Located on the Mediterranean coast of Lebanon, Beirut is a densely populated city with buildings, cars and people crammed together in a relatively small geographical area, surrounded by Mount Lebanon and its towns and villages. The city is lively and diverse in an architectural, cultural and social sense. Moving between areas exposes you to shifting architectural styles, as well as symbols denoting residents' religious and political identity. For example, in the predominantly Christian neighbourhood of Ashrafieh one sees small statues of saints and the flag of the Lebanese Forces, a Christian Maronite party. Whereas in Hamra, one sees Muslim men praying in the street and, here and there, businesses displaying small pictures of former Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, an indication that the owners are Shi'ite. Apart from various religious and political symbols adorning Beirut's streets and people, city areas are distinctly classed. For example, when walking in Gemmayzeh and Mar Mikhael one sees hip, Western-styled bars and cafés frequented by the city's middle class. When crossing the dried-up Beirut River to Bourj Hammoud – an area known as “Little Armenia” – businesses become more industrial in character and apartments more densely packed, signalling dwellers' poorer living conditions. Walking through the Bourj Hammoud's charismatic web of narrow streets, you can find gold craft jewellers, people on balconies talking with acquaintances down on the street and men having coffee on plastic chairs on the sidewalk. In summary, while areas in Beirut are seldom demographically homogenous, moving between them means transgressing a range of symbolic boundaries that mark the identity of city space (Monroe 2016:58-61; see also Harb & Deep 2013).

Public life in Beirut is intense, but also intimate and warm. Notably, the intimacy is evident in the constantly unfolding village-like interactions among residents, a part of Beirut's urban culture that challenges the view of modern cities as anonymous (Monroe 2016:3). These interactions are manifested in instances like when shop owners invite you to sit down for tea or say that you can pay the rest tomorrow when you lack change, as I experienced after having visited two convenience stores a couple of times, exchanging some rudimentary Arabic sentences with the owners. Hence, one can observe a vibrant civic culture in Beirut that fosters solidarity in an otherwise chaotic city space (Monroe 2016:119-120).

Beirut is also an insecure city. As anthropologist Kristin Monroe (2016:11) notes, the insecurities are “both an outcome of Lebanon's contentious

geopolitical milieu and part of a broader global experience of downward socioeconomic mobility and common anxieties that characterizes the human condition in the early twenty-first century.” Feelings of insecurity are partly related to economic struggle and lack of safety nets, reflecting the living conditions of many ordinary residents in Western cities. However, Beirutis also face challenges of living in what is commonly understood as a failed state, where corruption, political violence and multiple national crises compound everyday insecurity (Abu-Rish 2026b:240-42). In October 2019, an economic crisis hit Lebanon leading to the Lebanese pound losing 98 percent of its value (Abu-Rish 2026b:241-242), a dramatic event with ongoing repercussions for the population. In combination with dysfunctional transportation, garbage management and electricity infrastructure (Abu-Rish 2026b:242), many Lebanese experience a life constantly on edge.

And then there is war. This year’s Go Skate Day was taking place in the midst of negotiations between the United States and Iran, in which Israel’s attacks and occupation of Lebanese territory was a central source of uncertainty (see BBC 2026). The latest escalation of violence started in the beginning of March, 2026 after Hezbollah attacked an Israeli radar system near Haifa (Abu-Rish 2026a). During the preceding months, a formal ceasefire had been in place between the religio-political group² and Israel, during which Israeli forces carried out extensive destruction of homes and civilian infrastructure in the Lebanese South (Amnesty 2025).³ The renewed full-out war in March entailed intensified attacks, a ground invasion and evacuation orders by the Israeli military, leading to the displacement of over 1 million people in Lebanon (OHCHR 2026). Many of the displaced sought shelter in Beirut. About one kilometre from Marble – the gathering place for Go Skate Day – a refugee camp was set up at Beirut’s waterfront, consisting of tents and improvised shelters. By the end of June, the camp was in the process of being dismantled with the assistance

2 For a historical background of the relationship between Hezbollah and the Lebanese state, see Abu-Rish (2026a).

3 The current war is an expansion of Israel’s war on Gaza, starting on October 8 2023 when Hezbollah launched rockets into the occupied Shab’a farms area and later northern Israel (OHCHR 2026). The fighting escalated in September 2024 and most recently in March 2026. Summarising the casualties of the war in July 2026, Human Rights Watch writes: “Since October 8, 2023, more than 8,700 people, including at least 569 children and 357 medical workers, have been killed in Lebanon, according to Lebanon’s Health Ministry. Israeli forces have also repeatedly targeted and killed identifiable journalists covering the war, according to Reporters Without Borders. Hezbollah attacks have killed at least 32 civilians since October 2023, according to Israeli media” (Human Rights Watch 2026).

of the city police. Yet due to the destruction of infrastructure, homes and whole villages by the Israeli military many of the camp inhabitants would not be able to return to ordinary life (The Times of Israel 2026).



Camp for displaced at Beirut's waterfront. Photo by Johan Fagerberg.

While parts of the waterfront had come to constitute a refugee camp, people still made use of the area for jogging and recreative walks. As I visited the camp for distributing aid, a man stood by his scooter and dried himself with a towel after a swim in the sea. The sight of the man – as well as of the non-displaced joggers that made their way around the camp – illustrated that despite the hardships of war, and whether they are directly or indirectly affected by the violence, people try to maintain pleasurable activities and routines.

This essay analyses the entanglement of skateboarding in Beirut with the dangers and insecurities that shape life in the city. In what ways does the fun and subcultural sense-making of skateboarding melt together with the crisis-laden context of Lebanon? To explore this, I draw from my own experience of skating in Beirut, as well as my privilege of getting to know the city's small but vibrant skateboard community over the course of four visits to Lebanon, the last one taking place between June and August, 2026. The essay is ethnographic in the sense that I try to represent and analyse these experiences. I do so by writing about some of the "poignant mo-

ments” (Katz 2001) that capture skateboarding in Beirut, as well as the viewpoints of Karam and Ian, two senior participants of the city’s skate scene with whom I conducted two short interviews. While not claiming to present a complete picture of this skateboard community, which includes male and female skaters of different ages from diverse backgrounds, I wish to offer a glimpse into the play that takes place on the streets despite war and crises.

A playful craft of the city

Analytically, I follow Hölsgens and Glenney’s (2025) view of skateboarding as a craft of the city. As craft, skateboarding is learned through peer-relationships and experience, not least from hurting the body when falling. At its core, skateboarding involves the ability to sense and to make sense of the city to render it skatable. Polluted grey spaces that make up our cities – usually seen as environmental degradation and danger – are thus re-defined as pleasurable sites amenable to trick-play (Hölsgens & Glenney 2025:9-10). This view highlights the sensory, embodied and creative aspects of skateboarding, including skateboarders’ expertise of noticing urban objects’ potential to be skated (Hölsgens & Glenney 2025:10). While Hölsgens and Glenney mainly analyse the relation between skaters’ senses and built urban environment, I suggest that in volatile settings such as Beirut, skaters must also notice and *un-notice* the dangers and insecurity brought by crises and war, as well as its impact on city space. Accordingly, the essay’s analytical focus incorporates these elements of the urban environment in the understanding of skateboarding as a city craft.

Secondly, I regard skateboarding as a form of play. Playing means entering a mode of experience characterised by freedom, non-seriousness and fun, distinct from ordinary life (Huizinga 1950). As activity, playing has tension. The player wants to achieve something, and the outcome is uncertain (Huizinga 1950:10-11).⁴ In skateboarding, the goal to be achieved is the making of tricks. Trick play involves risk-taking, although in varying degree depending on the trick and the skater’s ability. Another aspect of play is its delimited nature; the playground designates the spatial boundaries of the play (Huizinga 1950:10). Skateparks are intended playgrounds for

4 An early theorist on the subject, Huizinga seems to more accurately capture the characteristics of games rather than play, for example by emphasising the rule-boundedness of play (see Asplund 1987:61-68). A game of S.K.A.T.E. and skateboarding competitions have rules, but not skateboarding in general.

skateboarders. Yet, some would say these parks take away some of the fun in skateboarding: the unpredictability of the city, whose unintended obstacles trigger skaters' spatial desire (Bäckström & Sand 2019). In street skating, the playground can be restricted to a "spot" – a specific area or object skaters appreciate for its skateability (Hölsgens & Glenney 2025:29-30) – but it can also be spontaneously emergent as when cruising the streets.

Playing means stepping into a different world, but the membrane around this world is porous. There is an interaction between play and society, including social norms that influence play and vice versa (Flaherty 2026:186-187). Moreover, playgrounds are affected by what is going on in the sphere outside the playing. In war and other violent contexts, children's play can be restrained by ongoing violence, but the latter can also be turned into playing, as portrayed in Roberto Benigni's film *La vita è bella*. In other words, playing deviates experientially from the outside world, while not completely escaping from it.

Although playing is done for the sake of it, it has social implications. Fun is a group pleasure that creates cohesion, but it also excludes outsiders (Fine & Corte 2017). Building on the work of Randall Collins, Ugo Corte (2022) maintains that having fun in groups generates positive emotional energy. For participants in dangerous sports, emotional energy and social cohesion increase when "fateful moments" are overcome, namely uncertain situations with potential to alter participants' lives (Corte 2022:84-86). While Corte writes about big wave surfing, his theory of fun and risk-taking is useful for understanding the sense of community found among Beirut's skateboarders, as well as the emotional states skateboarding can yield despite war and crisis.

In the following, I analyse how Beirut's skaters practice their playful city craft, focusing on how they relate to three sources of insecurity: war, political unrest and hazardous streets.

Noticing and un-noticing during war

The day I arrived at Beirut airport on June 14th, Israel carried out an attack in Dahiye, the city's southern suburb. The strike marked a halt of strikes on the capital after the spring's full-out war. While Israeli forces would remain in southern Lebanon, direct signs of war in Beirut would primarily be the soon-to-be dismantled refugee camp by the waterfront and the daily buzzing of Israeli drones. For the city's residents the summer would coin-

cide with a period of relative calm and a moment to breath (for an analysis of the ambiguous state of “not-war” that characterises life in Lebanon, see Hermez 2012).

How does war feed into the experience of skateboarding in Beirut, and how does skateboarding feed into the experience of war? One part of the answer lies in play’s ability to absorb participants, allowing them to step out of “real life” into a separate sphere (Huizinga 1950:8). When skaters enter the play sphere, what matters is the enjoyment of skating and being with friends, not the ongoing violence. It makes skaters forget the anxieties of war and, to some extent, the dangers of bombs. Thus, while the craft of skateboarding involves an art of noticing urban objects’ potential to be skated (Hölsgens & Glenney 2025:10), in Beirut the craft also implies the ability to un-notice certain aspects of war. While skating, signs of war, like sounds of bombs and drones, are forced into the background, being partially turned into no-things (see Persson 2026; Scott 2019).



Ibrahim doing a switch kickflip at Starco. Photo by Nayef Ghoul.

To illustrate, we can return to the scene from Go Skate Day. During this day, the joyful atmosphere and shared focus on skateboarding meant that the hovering drone was ignored. The skaters were aware of its presence but were not disturbed by it. By un-noticing the drone, skaters kept being absorbed in skating, filming, and talking with friends. Their ability to disre-

gard the drone was facilitated by the characteristics of a good skateboarding session, which is a combination of things that, when mixed together, have a tendency to immerse participants. First, skateboarding demands concentration – a pulsating focus that varies in intensity from moment to moment. It is high before and during the execution of a trick or when skating in unpredictable surroundings, and it is low in-between tricks or when socialising with peers. Second, since emotional energy is generated in high-focus situations and during states of flow (Corte 2022:85), occasions such as Go Skate Day are energy boosters: skaters are hanging out for hours, cheering on each other and push their limits in trick play. Perhaps due to the cognitive *and* physical character of emotional energy, skating helps blocking-out disturbing sounds more efficiently compared to, say, writing – an activity that is more cognitively dominated and performed individually. In this respect, skateboarding has also an advantage over other leisure activities such as having coffee or smoking shisha with friends. The sounds of rolling wheels, popping boards and cheering help bury the hostile drone noise.

To understand the skaters' non-reaction to the drone, we must also look at the broader context. At least since the expansion of hostilities in 2024, the buzzing of drones has become part of Beirut's soundscape. Hearing it is a psychologically taxing, yet normalised experience for the city's residents. To cope, Beirutis use a shared culture of irony, reflected in things such as nicknaming the drone Imm Kamel – "the mother of Kamel" (Hamdar 2025), as well as jokes like its sound works as white noise without which it becomes difficult to sleep. As Hermez (2012:339) points out, humour opens an ambiguous emotional space alongside the constant anticipation of violence. So, Beirut's skaters draw from a broader cultural repertoire for managing a psychologically draining war and occupation context, allowing them not only to play despite the buzzing, but also to challenge the violent reality imposed on them by the Israeli army.

Other times, war has more disruptive effects on the skateboarders, both negative and positive. Karam started skating in 2004, at a time when Beirut's skate scene was being formed. The 2006 Israel–Lebanon war forced some of his skateboard friends to emigrate. For him and the few other skaters who stayed, Beirut's streets laid empty. Furthermore, the war eased security companies' control over city space. "We had all the streets to ourselves. Keeping in mind that we couldn't skate here in Solidere [the downtown area] because it was full of security before that, but during the war we were like 'You're protecting something that can get bombed at any

second, so let us skate it *ya'ni*” (*ya'ni* translates into “I mean”). Reduced surveillance meant that new spots could be explored, mainly in the downtown area which compared to the southern suburbs of Dahiye was deemed as relatively safe by the group. “Downtown was the place to skate, knowing that we would hear bombs all the time, like heavy explosions in Dahiye,” Karam recalls. While the play-sphere that skaters entered was not isolated from the war, it diminished the significance of the dangers. While most people sought shelter indoors, the skaters saw the empty streets as an opportunity to be seized. This points to the importance for skaters to notice potential spots (Hölgens & Glenney 2025), but also to notice absence – of security guards and passers-by – which allows them to approach new spaces.

War cannot always be turned into play. Compared to the early 2000s, Beirut’s current skateboard community is more diverse and includes people with Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian background, some of whom live in Dahiye – the part of Beirut that has been the most targeted during war-time.⁵ Consequently, the 2024 war caused greater disruption and risks for the city’s skaters: “Nowadays most of the skaters live in Dahiye. We got dispersed for some time because it was crazy when [the Israeli army] started bombing Dahiye [in] 2024. We did not expect that, it was a normal day. All of the sudden, they assassinated Sayyed Hassan [Nasrallah], and then they started giving evacuation orders for *all* Dahiye. So it was just a crazy night,” Karam tells me. Amidst the chaos, he tried to get into contact with the other skaters: “we started talking on the skate group [chat] ‘Where are you? Where are you?’, like bombs here, bombs there, I don’t know where they are striking. I try to go to Dahiye; I couldn’t reach Dahiye because I remember the sky over Dahiye was red and [one of the skaters’] phone was off.” In the beginning of the war, the group was split and didn’t see each other for some time. This was in contrast to the latest escalation in March which did not come as a surprise to the skaters and the ones living in the southern suburbs could leave before the bombing started.

Corte (2022:85) writes that for people engaged in risky activities, the danger of a situation affects the level of focus needed to manage it. The higher the focus, the higher level of emotional energy is likely to be generated. Therefore, one could reason that also war, because of the uncertain-

5 While Dahiye’s population is predominantly Lebanese shi’i, its demographic is more homogenous than often posited in Lebanese and international discourse. Some municipalities in Dahiye are Christian-led, and Palestinian, Iraqi, Sudanese and Syrian refugees diversify the national and ethnic make-up of the area (Carpi 2023: 20, 32-33).



Diaa taking in the atmosphere. Photo by Nayef Ghoul

ty it entails, can bring excitement into skateboarding.⁶ When I ask Karam about this, I get a negative answer: “You’re a skater yourself. When you’re skating, you know that you forget, you leave everything behind, you know. If you are angry, upset, sad, something is worrying you – all this you leave behind when you are on your board”. Elaborating further, he says “I think skateboarding is this vehicle where you kind of transcend from this world into another world, where bombing and all these things don’t matter anymore”. Hence, while skaters do consider some dangers of urban environment as part of their playing (see below), the dangers of war are not part of the fun.

What determines the boundary between dangers that inform the playing, and dangers that are excluded? In her study on Norwegian soldiers’ experience of fun in Afghanistan, Mogstad (2025) found that their ability and desire to “play war” was contingent on technological superiority and the low-risk nature of their operations. When risks increased, the soldiers’ sensation of fun ebbed. While skaters in Beirut can make use of empty streets and absence of security guards during war, the fun they get is from trying to control their body, board and the unpredictability of the streets. In contrast, the devastating effects of war is beyond control, thus excluded from the playful experience.

Crafting spots in political unrest

Part of the skateboard craft is the re-definition of urban space into a playground. In street skating, a typical playground is a delimited area – a skate spot – that contains one or several obstacles such as ledges, handrails, stairs and gaps. As city features designed for other things, skaters use their imagination and skills to turn them into skateboard obstacles (Bäckström & Sand 2019). The crafting of spots is not merely a process taking place between skaters and urban objects; it requires negotiation with other users of the city, as well as property owners, security guards and the police (Hölsgens & Glenney 2025). When city space is placed under surveillance, skateboarders’ play is constrained. Security measures in Beirut are carried out through a mixed employment of private security companies, state police

6 The idea of war is prevalent in skateboard culture, reflected in expressions such as “hill bombing” and “trick battling”. It is also evident in skateboard magazine *Trash-er*’s YouTube-show *My War*, which documents pro-skateboarders’ painful attempts on high-risk obstacles until they, in an act of redemption, manage to land the trick. In both skateboarding and war, resilience is a virtue.

and military soldiers (Monroe 2016:85-87). A good example is downtown, an area that sparks skaters' spatial desire. Here, soldiers are positioned at some entrances and security guards monitor the up-scale boutiques and restaurants that are typical for this part of the city (see Harb & Deep 2013), limiting skateboarders' access to spots.

Skateboarding is informally allowed in one place in downtown. Starco is a plaza with ledges and gaps in different heights and constellations, making it beginner-friendly while encouraging creative trick-play among skilled skaters. Around the spot there are busy cafés, a shopping mall, a gas station and high-end residential buildings. While mornings here can be calm, from afternoons the plaza is used by break-taking workers that sit on the ledges smoking, dog-walkers, children selling roses and tissue paper on the street, joggers gathering for workouts, and skateboarders.

Not always has Starco had as central position in Beirut's skate scene as it currently enjoys. Around 2013, the plaza was approached by the group of young friends that skated in the city at the time. Back then, skateboarding was not allowed in the area. "We tried to skate here", Ian, who was an early skateboarder in Beirut, tells me, "but coming like, you know, three, four skateboarders down that hill would be pretty loud, so we'll find an army off security guards that are just blocking and protecting this area, ready to kick us out. You barely got one try on anything before we got kicked out". To avoid security guards, he and his friends would go to Starco early mornings, as they decided to do one night in December 2013. Waking up the next day, Ian found his mum watching the news. A car bomb had detonated at Starco, killing ex-minister Mohamad Chatah. Four others were killed and around 50 injured (BBC 2013). The friends called up each other to check that everyone was okay, "and luckily everyone was either too tired or too hung-over or too lazy or didn't wake up on time [to go to Starco as planned], and we were all safe. But [the bomb] also eased off the hold on this place," Ian explains as we are standing by the fountain where the bomb had detonated. "Security started caring less and less, they were being dispatched to other areas while this part was being fixed and people left this area alone because of not wanting be around a place that [had had a car bomb]."



A memorial on a skatable and previously waxed ledge at Starco honouring ex-minister Mohamad Chatah. Photo by Nayef Ghoul.

The killing of Chatah was one of several political assassinations, mainly carried out through car bombs, that shook Beirut in the early 2000s. The list includes the killing of prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Intensified security measures during those years severely restricted residents' movement in the city, particularly that of drivers (Monroe 2016:79-85). However, Ian's account suggests that a different dynamic was at play for the city's skaters. The violence and methods to prevent it could reduce spatial restraints for skateboarding. While Beirut's skaters were not granted full access to the Starco plaza until after 2020, the story points to a distinct aspect of the skateboarding craft: the ability to transform crisis into opportunity for play.

Speaking about spots with importance for the city's skate scene over the years, Karam recalls when the area around Martyr's Square – named after executions of Lebanese nationalists during the Ottoman era – was skated as the surrounding roads were blocked-off following Hariri's assassination 2005. A more recent example of skaters grasping the opportunity to play is Zaituna Bay, a high-end area by the waterfront. On the bay's upper level, along the Corniche⁷, there is a plaza with numerous ledges and stairs in

⁷ A five-kilometre boardwalk by the sea and one of the few spaces in Beirut that allows for recreation and spontaneous leisure (see Monroe 2016:31-32).

smooth, black marble, an aesthetic assemblage of skateable obstacles. In the midst of the economic crisis 2019, large protests erupted in Lebanon, accusing the governing class of corruption and financial mismanagement (Makdisi & Amine 2022). One skater explained that due to the crowds that would gather at Zaituna, security companies deemed it safer to reduce surveillance there, making the spot possible to skate. Compared to Starco, where the skateboarding ban was gradually lifted, security measures at Zaituna would be re-imposed as protests faded – to the extent that now, according to the same skater, one is barely allowed to walk by with a skateboard in hand.

The stories of Starco, Martyrs' Square and Zaituna Bay reflect an interweaving of Beirut's skateboarding scene with Lebanon's socio-political history. But the spots' trajectories also reveal the workings of power in Beirut's city space. At Zaituna, property owners have no apparent interest in lending the space to skateboarders; it is a firmly monitored area where non-upper-class visitors are accepted as long they are well-dressed (Khalili 2015:588). While being a wealthy area, the social dynamics at Starco are slightly different. For an outsider, it would seem as if skateboarding is not only accepted, but to some extent appreciated by local visitors. People often sit and watch the skateboarders, and guests of the surrounding cafés do not seem disturbed by the liveliness skating entails. The daily presence of skateboarders appears to have consolidated the plaza's identity as a skate spot, even for the city public at large (once, I heard a non-skater refer to it as "the skate park"). Nevertheless, concerns regarding their access to the spot are regularly aired among skaters. There is a nagging stress that incidents, caused by themselves or others, will bring about trouble with security. Therefore, senior members of the group are quick to point out potential consequences of misbehaviour. For example, when a graffiti tag had been sprayed on one of the ledges, Karam voiced concerns that they would be blamed, even though the person who did it was, from what I understood, not part of the skateboarders. While Beirut's skaters take advantage of socially disruptive events in their crafting of spots, they also navigate and adapt to the privatised surveillance of city space.

Hazardous streets

I am on my way back to the hotel after skating Starco. It has been a good session, the energy from the other skaters made me push through the tiredness I had felt earlier in the day. After 20 minutes or so walking, I say goodbye to the guys and depart in another direction. I roll down from the pavement to the road, finding a pace with the cars. A red light at the crossing separating downtown from Gemmayzeh forces the heavy traffic on the main road to stop. Functioning traffic lights are new to the city. Usually, drivers have to find their way using a determined yet careful approach against each other. Driving here also involves a lot of honking, both to signal one's intended direction and for airing frustration. However, even with functioning traffic lights, a red signal is no guarantee for vehicles to stop. I also know that as soon as it switches to green cars will move in high speed. In a race against the time, high on adrenaline and fresh confidence from the session, I push quickly over the road, illuminated by the awaiting cars (street lights are sparse in the city). Some seconds later, the vibration from asphalt under my feet turns into a smoother, rhythmic rattle from brick road, indicating I've made it over to the other side. A moment later, I feel my feet leaving the board, my body flies forward before hitting the ground. "Are you okay?", I hear someone ask as I rise up and limp back to pick up the board, giving a small gesture to the honking driver behind me to wait. The wheels had stuck in a drainage that I knew was there but forgot to manoeuvre. With aching body, I walk the last bit to the hotel. The rush I had felt by seizing the road has been replaced by humbleness, as well as shame for not being careful enough.

Writing about big wave surfers, Corte (2022:92-94) describes how the beauty and unpredictability of the ocean amplifies the fun of surfing. In a similar way, the intense city streets and traffic contributes to the fun of skating in Beirut. For the residents, *fowda* – chaos – is a central notion for describing the traffic (Monroe 2016:101-102). While chaos is subjectively defined, the lack of traffic lights, the narrow, congested roads and the negligible role of formal rules contribute to the view of traffic as chaotic. The last point has a class aspect to it. For example, during the summer, I learned about an effort to improve the rule-enforcement for helmetless motorcyclists, an initiative that, according to my observations, primarily targets working-class men. At the same time, it is common to see double-parked SUVs harming the flow of traffic; a practice mirroring the power relation between the city's economically privileged and other drivers,



Ian taking a break. Photo by Nayef Ghoul

as well as that between the former and traffic policemen who, in the encounter with high-status individuals, are rendered socially vulnerable (see Monroe 2016:133-137).

When I ask Karam what he likes the most with skating in Beirut, he responds: “The streets. *Ya’ni* until we started staying at Starco, we were raised up to a lot of cruising. If you wanted to go [somewhere] we would just push our way to the spot. We would sometimes just go and cruise here and there, and skate here and skate there, and bomb down hills; and when there’s traffic it’s the best thing because you would go in-between the cars in the streets”. For those skating when the skateboard community took shape in Beirut, cruising and exploring different spots is, or at least was, an essential part of the city craft. For Karam the traffic and its dangers are part of the playing. Also at Starco, traffic heightens the tension. Cars are

tightly parked along the streets that encircle the plaza, and boards often hit them when escaping skaters' control. Apart from avoiding the water-filled fountain by the plaza's lower end, managing the car-filled roads is part of the thrill of skating here. Therefore, lending the board to the children that come to the area to sell items entails both joy and nervousness of watching them play. Moments like these, Starco appears to function as a playground and a place for interaction across class and sect boundaries – the latter referring to the religious identities that organise Lebanon's political system and more or less shape Beirutis' leisure habits and use of space (Khalili 2016; Monroe 2016:58-84).

Pushed to the brink

Multiple crises and conflict have contributed to the view of Lebanon as being “pushed to the brink” (Monroe 2016:54). This view has not lost its relevance during the last decade, a time of economic instability and escalating military violence. Yet, as Abu-Rish (2026b:242) notes, the view of Lebanon as a failed state has meant that scholarly interest largely circles around the country's shortcomings. In this essay I have zoomed in on a subcultural community in Beirut – the city's skateboarders – to shed light on how some city residents come together and play despite the lack of security and safety. Their playing offers refuge, but skateboarding should not be understood as mere escapism. Rather, it is an attracting force (Corte 2022:113), bringing kids and adults together in a society divided along class and sectarian lines.

Building on the view of skateboarding as a craft of the city (Hölsgens & Glenney 2025), the essay has described different acts of noticing and un-noticing in a volatile setting. War and political unrest bring danger but also opportunity to play; noticing the absence of security guards is one example of how skaters practice their craft, un-noticing the sound of drones is another. Skateboarding is one of numerous leisure activities Beirutis engage in during war to carry on with their lives. Perhaps, the emotional energy generated when skating is particularly efficient for maintaining a sense of normality, as it re-directs focus from the abnormalities of war to something positive. Thus, skateboarding is a means to resist a violent reality that is imposed on society by rupturing the same reality (Akkad 2023). But maybe more importantly for Beirut's skaters, it offers a space to breathe in an overly privatised and securitised city.

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