Assisted Spontaneous Return

Context in Yemen

Yemen has generously hosted refugees and asylum seekers from Somalia for decades and, in 2025, the country is home to over 38,000.

At the same time, Yemen is among the worst humanitarian crises globally. Over 80 per cent of Yemenis live below the poverty line. In addition to instability, there is rampant inflation, high cost of living, a lack of livelihood opportunities, and limited access to basic services.

Refugees often face additional challenges linked to their displacement. Many struggle to meet their basic needs and face serious protection risks, such as exploitation and home eviction. As a result, many are forced to turn to harmful coping mechanisms, including skipping meals, school dropout, child labour, and early marriage.

Left: UNHCR partner staff support Somali refugees to board the boat to Somalia at Aden seaport © Doane/UNHCR

What is Assisted Spontaneous Return (ASR)?

ASR is a process to help Somali refugees and asylum seekers make informed decisions about possible return to Somalia and then to ensure safe and dignified travel for those who wish to make the journey. Support to reintegrate is also provided, enhancing the sustainability of return.

As of the end of 2024, and since the start of ASR in September 2017, UNHCR in Yemen had assisted 8,555 refugees from Somalia to return safely, 40 per cent of whom were children. The needs remain high in 2025.

Why is ASR important?

There is a clear demand in Yemen among refugees from Somalia to return home.

Without support, and with limited resources, the journey to Somalia can be incredibly dangerous. Those who make the journey face serious protection risks and even endanger their lives, especially those with vulnerabilities and specific needs. Despite the dangers, individuals and families, including children, often have no choice but to make these dangerous journeys.

ASR provides a safe and dignified alternative as well as access to counselling and information for those considering return to Somalia.

The ASR programme has supported individuals with chronic medical conditions as well as those who'd spent months homeless in Yemen to return home safely.

Reasons for Return

In Yemen, there is a clear demand for ASR which exceeds available resources.

Based on data collected from counselling sessions with refugees from Somalia in Yemen who wish to return to Somalia:

- 58.7 per cent indicate a lack of income in Yemen as the primary reason for returning;
- 38.4 per cent indicate a wish to reunite with family as the primary reason for returning;
- Other reasons included seeking medical care, education opportunities, improved security, and the lack of other durable solutions and the cost of living in Yemen.

In 2024, UNHCR provided ASR counselling sessions for 2,570 refugees.

The ASR approach:

1) Outreach through information campaigns.

2) Counselling

Individuals and families are counselled on the ASR process, information about area of return, and the current situation in Somalia to ensure informed decision making.

3) Assessment

Individuals and families register their interest and are assessed to identify protection concerns and missing or expired documentation such as missing birth or marriage certificates for targeted support.

4) Verification

Refugees who expressed interest to return will have their records verified and updated if needed.

5) Medical clearance

Medical check-ups are conducted to determine fitness to travel, and referrals are made for medical treatment as needed.

6) Issuance of travel documents

The Somali Embassy in Aden checks and confirms the nationality of those in the ASR programme and issues travel documents.

7) Exit permits

Exit permits are issued by the Immigration, Passport, and Nationality Authority in Yemen.

8) Departure

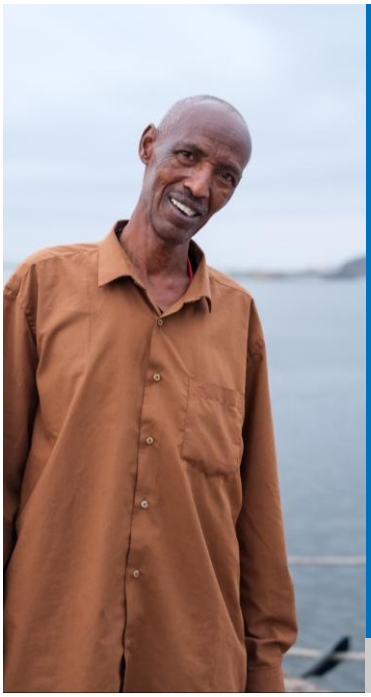
On the day of departure, individuals and families board a boat which departs from Aden to Berbera seaport. The journey takes approximately 12 hours.

9) Arrival to Somalia and onward movement

Upon arrival in Somalia, support is provided, including cash assistance, transportation, information provision, and a SIM card, facilitating safe travel to areas of origin.

10) Arrival home

Once at the destination, support is provided for reintegration and access to rights, such as education and employment.



Jailani's story

Jailani fled conflict in Somalia when he was 26. He is now 59 and returning to Somalia with UNHCR's support.

Jailani explained that life in Yemen has become too challenging recently. He can't find work and he can't support himself or his family. He hopes that the situation is better in Somalia.

Left: Jailani

Above: the boat before departure from Aden to Berbera. © Doane/UNHCR

Coordination: Cross-border movements with vulnerable individuals and families are complex and require coordination with multiple partners with a range of roles, as outlined above.

UNHCR works with Amal Bank, the Embassy of Somalia in Aden, the Field Medical Foundation, Human Access, the International Organization for Migration, the Immigration, Passport, and Nationality (IPNA-South) authority of the Ministry of Interior in Yemen, the Somaliland authorities, the National High Commission for Refugees and IDPs (NCRI) in Somalia.

2024 Achievements:

	Individuals assisted
Counselled on return	2,570
Assisted to return	1,115

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