

# Somalia-Yemen links: refugees and returnees

Maimuna Mohamud

**The strategies of Yemeni refugees in Somalia are extensively based on the social networks and cultural linkages that exist between the Horn of Africa and Yemen. Meanwhile, Somali refugees returning from Yemen need to find safer areas within Somalia.**

Many of the hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees to whom Yemen offered *prima facie* refugee status over the decades are having to return as a result of the fighting in Yemen. Meanwhile, uprooted Yemeni populations have been crossing the Gulf of Aden in ever greater numbers in hope of finding refuge and protection in Somalia and other states in the Horn of Africa.

It is at reception centres that Yemeni refugees and Somali returnees meet their first challenge – if they survive the perilous sea journey. As part of the registration process, refugees are required to produce documents that prove either Yemeni nationality or, in the case of returning Somali refugees, refugee status in Yemen. These centres – such as in the port cities of Berbera and Bossaso – are set up under the auspices of the regional Somali governments of Somaliland and Puntland to register refugees and returning Somalis. They are intended only to provide arriving refugees with emergency assistance like food and shelter, and as such are not equipped to make provision for the long-term settlement of the refugees or the returnees.

## Somali returnees

Somaliland, Puntland and the Federal Government in Mogadishu have all expressed willingness to take back their returning refugees. However, such rhetoric

is problematic. The governments seem to advocate assisting returnees to go back to their regions of origin soon after their arrival, regardless of whether the factors triggering their displacement still exist there. Each of the administrations have thus far been reluctant to put in place overarching policies and frameworks that can ensure the safety of returnees by supporting their relocation to safer regions. Each of the political administrations is unable (and in some instances unwilling) to protect and integrate Somalis who are faced with the abrupt transition from being refugees in Yemen to being returnees.

## Yemenis' strategies

In the context of Yemenis displaced to Somalia, UNHCR's encampment approach is being challenged by refugees. Many refugees have come to believe that registration and encampment will render them helpless in making important decisions like where to live and when to return home.

Because of the long history of contact, Yemeni refugees consider Somalia to be culturally familiar, despite the linguistic differences; this helps to instil confidence in their ability to navigate the challenges of urban life there. There is a trend of Yemeni refugees preferring to 'self-settle' in the capital cities of Hargeisa and Mogadishu,

where help can be obtained from the existing populations of Yemenis. To date, the policy of the government of Somaliland allows Yemeni refugees to settle in urban areas with relative ease and many Yemeni refugees in both Hargeisa and Mogadishu have set up small businesses. In each of these two cities there are Yemeni Diaspora Chapters. These Chapters work to track the numbers of Yemenis arriving, informally register them and assist them with finding information and shelter. The Yemeni Diaspora Chapters also fulfil the purpose of coordinating between refugees and authorities, whether local or national. These Chapters play an essential role in refugees' decisions about where and how to settle.

Yemeni refugees in Somalia draw on two important resources to survive with autonomy: long-standing economic and cultural ties between the two nations, and the support of other Yemenis in the diaspora. These resources enable refugees to explore alternative means of survival rather than relying on assistance in refugee camps. However, despite the high level of self-sufficiency of Yemeni refugees living in Somalia's two largest cities, the protection of their legal rights remains largely unaddressed.

### Self-settlement and assistance

There are two important questions, not only for UNHCR and its partners but also for the Somali governments: firstly, how the government(s) can provide institutional protection and assistance to refugees and, secondly, how the aid agencies can provide assistance and protection to urban communities who are



The market place in Basateen, the Somali-majority area of Aden in south Yemen.

opposed to resettlement in rural camps and deterred by the long-term consequences of encampment on their freedoms and dignity.

Given the consequent reluctance of most refugees to register officially with UNHCR, promoting better relations between Yemeni Diaspora Chapters and international organisations is critical for gathering information about urban refugees in order to support their needs over time. It is also essential that local Somali governments maintain and encourage favourable attitudes towards refugees regardless of residency; if the Somali authorities allow Yemenis to establish businesses with as few restrictions as possible, the refugees can contribute positively to the economic development of the region.

The Somali authorities' political and practical capability to coordinate responses to refugees and returnees must start with revising current ad hoc policies and laying the groundwork for realistic institutional responses across the Somali region – for Somalis to return sustainably and for Yemenis to be able to create active lives in exile.

Maimuna Mohamud  
[maimuna.mohamud@heritageinstitute.org](mailto:maimuna.mohamud@heritageinstitute.org)  
 Independent researcher