

A SEAT AT THE TABLE OF PEACE



Reem walked along the path at a steady pace. She knew she was dreaming because the painful limp she had in real life was gone. She'd often had dreams of walking without her limp, and she was enjoying this one—until she saw a split in the path ahead of her. How would she know which way to go? Rarely had life offered her the luxury of a choice. Alarm grew within her as the dream carried her closer and closer to the looming fork in the way. Then—seemingly from nowhere—a man in white appeared just as she reached the fork. Reem felt shy as the man approached her, but not afraid. Without speaking He took her hand and she felt strangely calmed. Then He pointed. Reem looked down the path He gestured towards, and to her surprise she saw a familiar figure waiting for her just ahead. Reem looked back at the man in white. He smiled and nodded and let go of her hand—encouraging her to take the path He'd indicated.

Born into poverty and living with a disability, Reem was illiterate when Yemen's war started in 2015. Over the next eight years, women like Reem living in rural villages around the country would face steadily increasing hardship and hunger. Their opportunities in life that already seemed nonexistent would somehow be further reduced. Yet Reem's own story had turned out quite differently due to the work of a local nonprofit.

Early in the war, the nonprofit had started a literacy project in Reem's village, which she joined and learned to read and write and do basic math for the first time in her life. Then, after she completed the literacy program, the nonprofit had offered Reem another opportunity. They were planning to start a preschool for the village children to help prepare them to succeed in kindergarten. If Reem was willing to be the preschool teacher, she would get a small stipend. Reem had agreed eagerly and for the first time in her life she found herself earning not only money, but respect. Now when she walked through the village, even with her painful limp, the other villagers greeted her as teacher.

Reem couldn't believe her good fortune during these years that her country was being devastated by war. However, besides the work of the nonprofit, the war had brought something else to Reem's village—a woman named Layla, who was the familiar figure that she'd seen on the path ahead of her in her dream. Layla and her husband had been displaced to Reem's village because of the war, and at first, Reem had been intimidated by the sophisticated woman from the city. Within a few months though, Reem had seen that Layla was warm and kind and always looking for ways to encourage the women around her. She started to spend more time with Layla, yet whenever she did there were still shadows lurking in the back of her mind. Reem had heard rumors that Layla and her husband were Christians. She wasn't really sure what that meant, but she was sure that there was only one path to pleasing God—the sharia law of Islam. There simply

was no other way, and to consider anything else would be unthinkable—so Reem did just that. She didn't think and she ignored the rumors about Layla and her husband until she had the strange dream about the man in white. As she woke from that dream, the shadows in her mind had been transformed into a surprising curiosity and she was anxious to talk to Layla.

When Reem told Layla about her dream, Layla explained to her that the man in white was Christ. Reem wasn't sure who Christ was, but finally she wanted to know. In the months since then, Layla has been answering Reem's many questions and she is praying that God will give Reem the courage to follow the new path that Christ showed her in her dream.

Just as Reem stands at a crossroads, the nation of Yemen likewise stands at a crossroads at the beginning of 2023. However far-fetched, hope remains that Yemen's warring parties may choose to walk the path of negotiating a lasting, peaceful solution. The most promising indications of this surround discussions being mediated by a delegation from Oman, a country whose historic neutrality in the region has positioned it to facilitate resolutions to otherwise intractable conflicts in the past.¹

A second scenario that many consider more likely is a perpetuation of the current stalemate in which there is neither a commitment to peace nor the will to return to open warfare. In this case, the Houthis would continue as the de facto rulers in the north, while the Internationally Recognized Government (IRG) and southern secessionists would continue their own power struggles within the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) that was formed to create a united rule in the south. While the relative calm of walking this path might provide Yemenis with a measure of stability, it would also allow militant groups to expand and consolidate their influence, further restricting human rights in the areas they control. A third possible scenario is a reescalation to all-out war—a path that would perhaps be the most devastating for the Yemeni people and leave millions of lives and livelihoods hanging in the balance.²

Meanwhile, a new way that could lead to more effective peacebuilding in Yemen may be amplifying the voices and roles of Yemeni women in high-level negotiations. To date, efforts to increase women's representation in the peace process have had varying levels of success and impact. While the Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security has been used as an advisory board to support the UN's Special Envoy responsible for facilitating Yemen's peace negotiations—UN Security Council representative Geraldine Nason has pointed out that "consultation should not be a substitute for meaningful participation... women must be at the negotiating table and encouraging all parties to work to that end."³

In this new year, let's join our brothers and sisters in Yemen in praying for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in their country and in asking God to give wisdom and courage to the leaders involved in the peace negotiations. Pray also that God would strengthen women like Layla to continue living as faithful witnesses of the Gospel and that just as Christ welcomed women into His inner circle and gave them a seat at the table, that the Holy Spirit would now work to dismantle the barriers to their full participation in public life and peace processes in Yemen. Thank God that His Holy Spirit is already at work, drawing Reem and other Yemenis nationwide to Christ and showing them the path of true peace and reconciliation that is only found in Him. Ask Him to bring an end to the violence and suffering in Yemen, and to bring hope and healing to the Yemeni people.

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1 <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230116-yemen-houthi-official-says-discussions-with-oman-pave-way-for-peace/>

2 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/4/after-months-calm-yemen-looks-anxiously-new-year>

3 <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/seat-negotiating-table-how-women-are-building-peace-yemen>