Two frameworks, unequal outcomes

Camp David and the Egypt-Israel peace, 1978-82

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The hook

Thirteen days of summit talks produced two frameworks, not a finished peace treaty. One track became an Egypt-Israel treaty and a monitored Sinai withdrawal. The broader Palestinian track did not produce the promised settlement. The decision was whether a bounded agreement could proceed without making an unresolved conflict disappear on paper. [S1-S3, S6-S8]

Abstract

The Camp David summit of September 1978 produced two frameworks: one for a broader Middle East settlement and another for an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. This case asks why a bounded bilateral agreement became implementable while the Palestinian track remained unresolved. Original texts, correspondence and negotiating records show the importance of staged obligations, domestic approval, disputed language and third-party commitments. The March 1979 treaty specified withdrawal, normalization, security zones and dispute procedures; a monitoring organization began work in April 1982 when the principal Sinai withdrawal concluded. These are observable milestones, not proof that the accords solved the regional conflict or created equal benefits for everyone. United Nations criticism and the absence of Palestinian participation expose the limits of bargaining over people outside the negotiating room. For Sri Lanka, the conditional lesson is to distinguish a signed framework from authorized, verified execution, while keeping unresolved rights and representation visible throughout the process.

The decision question

Should negotiators pursue a narrower agreement when the broader settlement remains blocked? What safeguards prevent a useful partial agreement from being presented as consent on behalf of absent people?

Independent teaching case. Not an HBS publication. Recommendations are labelled judgment. Historical focus, not an assessment of current military operations or a claim that the region is at peace today.

1. What the summit could and could not decide

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and US President Jimmy Carter met at Camp David from 5 to 17 September 1978. The signed broader framework named a comprehensive settlement as its purpose and invited other parties to join. The invitation did not mean those parties had accepted the bargain. [S1]

The US State Department's historical account describes a deadlock after earlier direct talks and explains that Carter and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance increasingly met the Egyptian and Israeli delegations separately when the trilateral format became difficult. This is institutional historical context, not a claim that private mediation alone caused the outcome. [S8]

Exhibit 1. Two tracks with different authority

Egypt-Israel track. The framework set a goal of concluding a peace treaty within three months. Egypt and Israel could negotiate their own bilateral commitments, subject to approval and implementation. Camp David was the framework stage, not the March 1979 treaty itself. [S1-S3]

West Bank and Gaza track. The framework envisaged negotiations involving Egypt, Israel, Jordan and representatives of the Palestinian people. A five-year transitional period would begin when a self-governing authority was established and inaugurated. Final-status negotiations were to begin no later than the third year of that transition. A proposed timetable was not evidence that the authority had been established or the transition had begun. [S1]

The authority gap. Jordan and Palestinian representatives were not signatories to the Camp David bargain. The State Department account reports that Palestinian representatives did not participate in the subsequent autonomy talks and that positions remained unbridgeable. The framework cannot be read as their completed consent. [S1, S8]

The competing choices

Analytical alternatives, not reconstructed cabinet minutes: wait for a comprehensive settlement; accept a bilateral opening and risk leaving the broader conflict behind; or pursue a bounded treaty while explicitly preserving unsettled questions. The case evaluates the last path without assuming it was fully achieved or politically costless.

2. The bargain behind the ceremony

The related correspondence makes the Sinai settlements issue concrete. Sadat's 17 September letter stated that all Israeli settlers must withdraw from Sinai within the treaty implementation period and that agreement by Israel's government and constitutional institutions was a prerequisite to peace negotiations. Carter's reply recognized the requirement for Knesset approval. Begin's letter set out how he would present the question to the Knesset. [S2]

This is more precise than a story of three leaders trusting one another. A leader's negotiating position, an institution's approval and a later withdrawal were separate steps. The letters are primary evidence of conditions and intended approval routes, not proof that every step had already happened at the summit. [S2]

Ambiguity could move the process and endanger it

A note prepared by Carter records his understanding of a late 16 September discussion about settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. He said an agreed paragraph would be moved from the framework into a public letter, and that the relevant negotiations were the West Bank-Gaza negotiations. The note's editorial apparatus identifies competing accounts and warns that exactly what happened in the conversation cannot be known with certainty. [S4]

The State Department's later overview describes a subsequent dispute over the duration of a settlement freeze. This case therefore does not treat Carter's account as an uncontested, legally completed agreement. It uses the record to show how the scope and duration of a promise can remain disputed even when a ceremony proceeds. [S4, S8]

Judgment: moving language into a side letter may bridge a drafting impasse, but it can also separate the public impression from the terms each party thinks it accepted. A commitment needs the same object, duration and conditions in the records relied on by all parties.

The mediator's limits

A mediator can propose text, relay conditions and supply assurances. It cannot make absent people accept a final-status arrangement or replace a party's domestic approval. The bargaining advantage of a smaller room must be weighed against the legitimacy problem created by exclusions.

Discussion. Which ambiguities permit a next step, and which make the promised step unverifiable? Would you sign if the parties agree on the wording but disagree on its duration?

3. From framework to treaty

The three-month treaty goal was not met. The treaty was signed on 26 March 1979, after further negotiations. The State Department record describes a final package comprising a preamble, nine articles, security and normalization annexes, agreed minutes and associated letters. Calling the September summit a finished peace treaty erases this second negotiation stage. [S1, S3]

Exhibit 2. Time between decisions

17 September 1978: Camp David frameworks signed.
26 March 1979: Egypt-Israel treaty signed.
Desk calculation: 190 elapsed calendar days, about 6.2 months using 30.44 days per month. The framework's three-month goal would have fallen on 17 December 1978; the treaty signature came 99 days after that date. These are chronology calculations, not an estimate of diplomatic effectiveness. [S1, S3]

The treaty's executable terms

Article I terminates the state of war upon exchange of ratification instruments and provides for Israeli armed forces and civilians to withdraw from Sinai and for Egypt to resume sovereignty there. Article IX makes ratification exchange the entry-into-force condition. Signature and legal effect were therefore distinct milestones. [S5]

Annex I specified an interim withdrawal within nine months and final withdrawal within three years, both measured from the exchange of ratification instruments. It created a joint commission to supervise and coordinate movements and schedules within the agreed limits. Those clocks should not be counted from the September summit or the March signing ceremony. [S5]

The treaty also specified normal relations and military limitations in defined zones. Article VII required disputes over application or interpretation to be addressed by negotiations, with conciliation or arbitration for disputes not settled that way. This did not ensure every dispute would vanish; it supplied a route other than force. [S5]

Judgment: these provisions made the bilateral bargain more executable by specifying who must move, what must change, when the clock starts and how disagreements should be handled. The case does not separately estimate how much each provision contributed to compliance.

4. Verification was another negotiation

The treaty initially envisaged United Nations forces and observers. The Multinational Force and Observers' institutional history explains that, when the UN did not assume the planned role, an alternative arrangement was required. It describes interim monitoring by the US Sinai Field Mission and the later protocol establishing the MFO in August 1981. The MFO was not simply present from the September 1978 summit onward. [S5-S6]

The same history records Carter's March 1979 assurances that the United States would take steps to establish an alternative multinational force if the United Nations could not fulfill the role. Promising monitoring was progress; arranging personnel, access and an accepted mandate was additional work. [S6]

Exhibit 3. A specified monitoring function

The MFO describes four security zones, three in Sinai and one in Israel. Its mission is to supervise the treaty's security provisions and use best efforts to prevent violations. Its listed tasks include checkpoints, patrols and observation posts, periodic verification at least twice a month unless the parties agree otherwise, and additional verification within 48 hours of a request by either party. [S7]

These are stated mandate and procedure details, not a claim that every violation is prevented or that this case independently audited every inspection. The current mission page also discusses later responsibilities. They are not retroactively attributed to the original 1978 agreement. [S7]

The implementation milestone

The MFO's account dates the start of its mission to 25 April 1982, alongside the principal Sinai withdrawal and return of sovereignty. This case uses that milestone rather than claiming all territorial issues or bilateral disputes were permanently settled that day. [S6]

Judgment: a treaty becomes more credible when each side can verify the other's sensitive actions without relying only on its own intelligence or public accusations. But verification cannot supply the political consent missing from another track. Monitoring a military zone is not the same function as representing people in final-status negotiations.

Discussion. What should happen when the institution named in a treaty cannot perform its role? Who must approve a substitute, and how will its limits be made visible?

5. The success boundary

The bilateral treaty and Sinai implementation were substantial outcomes. The broader Palestinian settlement was not an equivalent success. The State Department's account describes failed autonomy talks, lack of Palestinian participation and continued differences over self-government, settlements and East Jerusalem. These are limits on what can be credited to Camp David, not minor footnotes to a complete regional peace. [S3, S6, S8]

A primary record of opposition

UN General Assembly resolution 34/65 of 29 November 1979 criticized the Palestinian provisions and declared the accords and other agreements invalid insofar as they purported to determine the future of the Palestinian people and territories occupied since 1967. This is the Assembly's stated position, not this case's independent legal ruling that the Egypt-Israel treaty had no validity. The resolution's specified scope must be retained. [S9]

A balanced reading separates two questions: could Egypt and Israel execute a bilateral agreement; and could the participating leaders settle Palestinian rights and representation without Palestinian participation? Evidence of progress on the first question does not answer the second.

Conditional lessons for Sri Lanka

Define the bounded outcome. Judgment: identify the issue negotiators can actually settle and list what remains unresolved. Do not label a partial agreement a complete political settlement. A narrower deal can have value without granting authority over absent people.

Separate the approval gates. Judgment: keep framework, domestic authorization, ratification, entry into force and implementation distinct. Start deadlines from the agreed legal event. Track who can approve each commitment rather than treating a negotiator's words as the final institutional act.

Make the terms recoverable. Judgment: use common text for object, duration, conditions and exceptions. If side letters are needed, preserve their status and explain discrepancies before relying on them. Ambiguity should not conceal incompatible promises.

Arrange verification before declaring delivery. Judgment: name the monitoring institution, access, reporting and fallback route. A promised observer is not an operating observer. Preserve a non-force dispute process while acknowledging its limits.

Keep representation visible. Judgment: ask whose rights are affected, who has participated and whose consent remains needed. Sri Lanka's setting differs from an interstate territorial treaty; copying the architecture requires local legal and social legitimacy, not importing this bargain.

Decision. Pursue an authorized, verifiable bounded agreement where useful, but keep the broader rights and representation questions explicitly open. Do not make implementation success do the work of missing consent.

Sources, calculations and limits

All sources inspected 10 October 2026. Original signed text, letters, negotiating notes and treaty provisions anchor the case. Institutional histories and the monitoring body's account are attributed. UN criticism retains its specific scope. This is a 1978-82 decision case, not a current regional situation report.

S1. Jimmy Carter Library, signed framework, 17 September 1978. Broader Middle East framework: treaty goal, West Bank-Gaza transition, proposed participation and final-status timetable. It is not evidence those proposed steps occurred.
https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/research/framework_for_peace_in_the_middle_east

S2. Jimmy Carter Library, related correspondence. Letters dated 17 September 1978 and Carter replies dated 22 September. Sinai settlements condition and Knesset approval route. Conditions are separated from fulfilled outcomes.
https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/research/camp_david_accords_related_correspondence

S3. FRUS 1977-80, Volume IX, revised edition, document 239. Editorial record of 26 March 1979 treaty signature and final package. Context from archival records; not a replacement for treaty text.
https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v09Ed2/d239

S4. FRUS, same volume, document 54. Carter's note on the 16 September settlement discussion. His account is attributed; editorial references preserve competing accounts and uncertainty.
https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v09Ed2/d54

S5. UN-hosted original peace treaty, 26 March 1979. Articles I, VII and IX; Annex I withdrawal deadlines and commission. Ratification-triggered obligations, not signature-triggered clocks.
https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-207070/

S6-S7. Multinational Force and Observers. Institutional accounts of origins, mission commencement on 25 April 1982, mandate and verification procedures. Stated mission is not an independent compliance audit.
https://www.mfo.org/origins
https://www.mfo.org/mission-begins
https://www.mfo.org/our-mission

S8. US Department of State, Office of the Historian. Camp David Accords and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process. Institutional historical context on mediation and unsuccessful autonomy talks, not contemporary cabinet minutes.
https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/camp-david

S9. UN General Assembly resolution 34/65, 29 November 1979. Primary record of the Assembly's objections concerning Palestinian rights and representation. Not treated as invalidating every aspect of the bilateral treaty.
https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-188441/

Calculation. 26 March 1979 minus 17 September 1978 = 190 days; divided by 30.44 = 6.24 months. 26 March 1979 minus 17 December 1978 = 99 days. No estimated peace dividend, counterfactual war reduction or household welfare gain. Sri Lankan lessons are judgment, not equivalence between the conflicts.