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Debate topic for Texans: Peace

The quest for peace in the Middle East has stymied many of the world's brightest, best-educated adults. So let's see how high school students do.

Written by Taryn Luna

Twenty-four of the nation's top high school debaters - including eight from Texas - are flying today to Jordan, where they'll go head-to-head in debates with 24 Jordanian students about the U.S. role in supporting a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

The program, "Four Star Debate," is hosted by Tommy Franks, the retired Army general who once commanded all U.S. armed forces in a 25-country region that included the Middle East. The debates are sponsored by Franks' leadership institute; the **National Center for Policy Analysis**, which has its headquarters in Dallas; and the Academy of Leadership and Liberty at Oklahoma Christian University.

"Part of the inspiration for this camp is Gen. Franks himself, who believes that young people need to learn to disagree with each other without being disagreeable," said **John Goodman**, president and chief executive of the **National Center for Policy Analysis**.

For the program's first two years, 50 high school students were competitively selected from around the United States to attend a

leadership and debate camp at Oklahoma Christian.

As the general who led American forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, Franks - who grew up in Midland - knows many prominent leaders in the Middle East.

He teamed with his friend, King Abdullah of Jordan, to raise the camp to another level this year by sending 24 American students to King's Academy near Amman, Jordan.

The eight Texans in the group include five from the Dallas area. Among them are the brother-sister combo of Andrew McNair, 16, and Caroline McNair, 17, of Argyle.

"I feel that it's a very enriching experience, and it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Andrew said.

He's spent two weeks researching U.S. policies on a comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

Caroline hasn't been hitting the books as hard, but she's happy to talk to her brother about what he's learned.

"We're a team," she said with a laugh.

They started in debate as a way to make friends when they began home-schooling during middle school. At first, Caroline said, she wasn't interested. Then her brother's partner couldn't make a tournament, and she had to step in.

"Learning the art of debate has made our fights between each other turn into arguments, which is more interesting," she said.

The debate tournament begins Wednesday. While in Jordan, the students will visit the ancient city of Petra, the Dead Sea and Wadi Rum, a valley carved into the sandstone and granite desert.

Goodman, a former high school debater, said he hoped the experience would help the high school students hone their leadership skills.

"If you look at Congress," he said, "many of the members were on debate teams in high school."