

BRISTOW — The headline-dominating stories of Syria and its struggling people may seem worlds away to many Oklahomans. But not to Vicki Calvin. She's been immersed in that culture her whole life. "I grew up with friends who always had tabouli and hummus (Middle Eastern delicacies) in the fridge," said Calvin, a court reporter who grew up in Bristow. "That was as American here as macaroni and cheese." Located 30 miles west of Tulsa in Creek County, Bristow remains a place where Syrian-Lebanese influence flourishes. It boasts a pair of tabouli factories and an annual Tabouleh Fest. One of the town's founding fathers was Joe Abraham, who came to the United States from his native Beirut, Syria (now Lebanon), and settled in Bristow before statehood. Besides owning many farms and thousands of acres of oil and gas interests, Abraham became among the largest cotton dealers in the South. "We all know Joe Abraham," said Creek County District Judge Joe Sam Vassar, who lives and works in Bristow. "I think he owned five cotton gins." As Abraham's holdings grew, he encouraged friends in Lebanon to join in the prosperity of Bristow. And as the immigrant population climbed, the interest with Lebanese food spread to the city and beyond. Edmond Slyman, who lives in Bristow, had a great uncle who settled in the area in 1889. Since 1971, he has operated Freddie's Bar-B-Q and Steakhouse in Sapulpa, an eatery that's been in the family more than half a century. "It's pretty important," Slyman, a Bristow city councilor, said of the culture. "Myself and another guy in Bristow, Rick Root, started the Tabouleh Fest to continue some of the Lebanese heritage that goes on there. "As for the Lebanese people who live there, as compared to the past, there are not as many. I'm probably one of the last." The crisis in Syria has taken center stage across the globe. Millions there have been forced from their homes during that country's ongoing civil war. In addition, the Obama administration announced in September that 10,000 Syrians will be allowed entry next year, although more than half of the nation's governors oppose that passage. Slyman said he can

empathize with those suffering, but he noted that many families stateside are generations removed from that kind of climate. "Some have a connection because they have immigrant parents," he said. "But American Lebanese are completely different. They are born American. We're proud to be of the heritage, but we're not proud of the activity that's going on now."

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