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TURKEY: Celebrity lawyer takes on Turkish government, banks for Armenian assets

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The Los Angeles-based Lawyer Mark Geragos is used to representing celebrities like Chris Brown and the late Michael Jackson, but he recently took on a very different kind of case, one with deep personal significance for him.

Last Thursday, Geragos and his team of litigators filed a lawsuit against Turkey and two major Turkish banks seeking restitution for Armenian properties and assets that were seized by Ottoman forces during the mass killings that took place almost a century ago and that many have labeled the first modern genocide.

Turkey denies the killings constitute genocide, and the United States' federal government has not formally recognized them as such, although 44 states have done so individually. Earlier this year, the U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee [approved a measure](#) to officially recognize the killing of Armenians as genocide, but it has yet to make it to the floor for a vote.

Geragos spoke with Babylon and Beyond in a recent interview about the significance of the case and his personal connection to it:

B&B: You have been involved in some very high-profile criminal cases. How is this lawsuit different for you and the other lawyers involved? It is our understanding that they are all of Armenian descent.

Geragos: We have all had serious cases, but all of us had relatives that were victims... it's extremely moving and infuses great passion in your work. It's one of those where you find out what it really means to be a lawyer.

B&B: So after almost a century since these crimes were committed, what are the circumstances causing these charges to be filed now?

Geragos: What I can tell you is that the emergence of certain documents and facts are behind the filing of this lawsuit. Unfortunately, for strategic reasons I can't tell you much more.... You should see some development in 180 days.

B&B: Can you comment on the estimates for the amount to be paid to the descendants of the victims?

Geragos: We haven't even begun to fathom the amount to be compensated but the amount paid to the plaintiffs and those with deeds will clearly be in the billions.

B&B: Is there any legal precedent for a case like this? Are these cases similar to any from the Jewish Holocaust?

Geragos: Other than a lawsuit involving Hungary and stolen artwork this is the closest thing to that, but this is obviously more all-encompassing in scope given what was taken. The Holocaust cases for the most part were settled between countries. The Armenian cases have been exclusively litigated in the courtroom.

B&B: What is the significance of a case like this in terms of gaining more international recognition for crimes that were committed against Armenians?

Geragos: Really we are beyond recognition. Reagan called it "Genocide"...The "R" word is really restitution, not recognition. Restitution is now considered a

right when you are a victim of a crime and this is really where we need to fight it. Restitution for Armenians is also an integral part of rebuilding now that Armenia has its independence.

B&B: What are your hopes for this case and what it will represent?

Geragos: One would hope that this could serve as a flashpoint for the Turkish people themselves to realize that history is moving forward and they should be trying to make restitution instead of putting their heads in the sand. They should embrace it and move past it instead of spending money on lobbying to deny a historical fact.... We have yet to see any major reactions to the filing of the suit in Turkey; however there has been tremendous support from the international community.

-- Patrick Gallagher in Beirut

Photo: L.A.-based lawyer Mark Geragos is best known for representing Hollywood celebrities, but he recently took on the Turkish government over Armenian assets seized by the Ottoman government. Photo courtesy of Mark Geragos

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