

Daily Journal

— SINCE 1888 —

MONDAY,
JULY 30, 2007

Industry Watch

Lawyer's Work With Armenia Hits Close to Home

By **Alexa Hyland**
Daily Journal Staff Writer

As a young boy, Vahe Yacoubian never imagined he would one day represent his family's homeland as an attorney.

A Lebanese-born Armenian, Yacoubian started working with the Republic of Armenia eight years ago, assisting the former Soviet nation in its privatization efforts.

In May, Armenia honored the Manatt, Phelps & Phillips counsel for his work, giving him the Mkhitar Gosh Medal, named after an Armenian monk who wrote the country's first legal code.

"It was all very emotional to receive the award on May 28, the day when the first Armenian Republic was declared before Soviet control," Yacoubian said.

His personal ties to Armenia stem back to his grandparents, who he said are survivors of Armenia's war with Turkey. His family settled in Lebanon, where Yacoubian attended an Armenian school.

The family moved to Los Angeles during Lebanon's civil war in 1976, and Yacoubian enrolled at UCLA. After obtaining undergraduate and law degrees, he became a Washington, D.C., lobbyist serving the American Armenian community. Then he joined Manatt Phelps in 1995.

At Manatt, Yacoubian said, he realized how the firm's international presence could help shape his legal career.

"The firm's intellectual power, political savvy and entrepreneurial spirit give its members the opportunity to pick directions and develop them," he said.

In 1998, he started to strengthen his international trade and policy practice when he represented California investors who bid for and purchased the second-largest hotel in Armenia's capital, Yerevan.

After that transaction, Yacoubian helped arbitrate a dispute between Armenia and a



Greek company that bought 90 percent of Armentel, the state-owned telecommunications provider.

The dispute, which centered on an \$88 million tax claim, settled.

"It was an incredible experience," he said of the proceedings.

Yacoubian said that as Armenia continued to privatize its state-owned businesses, he worked to help establish a solid legal foundation for companies wanting to do business in the nation.

"Working with a country that is at the development stages after going through a Soviet-controlled system, you come to rely on good judgment and instincts," he said.

He also relied on his Los Angeles colleagues, Manatt Phelps partners Harold Reichwald and Andrew Satenberg, to help him on several more of Armenia's privatization endeavors.

In addition to working in the telecommunications sector, Yacoubian, Reichwald and Satenberg represented the government in the privatization of the Electricity Distribution Network and its efforts to privatize the management of Armenia's Zvartnots International Airport.

Although representing Armenia holds an emotional significance for Yacoubian because of his heritage, he also works with other foreign governments.

Fluent in English, French, Arabic and Armenian, Yacoubian has worked on projects in Russia, Uzbekistan, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates and Germany.

He also negotiated some of the first wine export contracts between state-owned producers in Bulgaria and a U.S. importer.

"I was able to mix my culinary interests with my profession," he said.

Each time he represents a different foreign government, Yacoubian said, he finds the cases challenging.

"My work is as creative as professional," he said. "It's not like you can open a textbook and find solutions to the problems that face you."

Although many private attorneys in the United States represent foreign governments, Yacoubian said, few of those lawyers have the close personal ties to their countries that he has to Armenia.

"I was given the opportunity to be here to advise the government of the nation of my ancestors, and be part of its development during a historically important period," he said.

Yacoubian is the third American to receive the Mkhitar Gosh Medal.

In 2002, Rep. Joe Knollenberg, R-Mich., received the medal for helping the United States and Armenia strengthen relations.

Last year, Armenia's President Robert Kocharian awarded U.S. Ambassador John Evans the medal after Evans completed his two-year diplomatic duties with the nation.