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THE WEEKLY PRINT

The general who coined the Abraham Accords; For Israeli high-tech, 2021 was a 'bumper' year says head of Innovation Authority; Strauss Zelnick's Take-Two buys Mark Pincus's Zynga in \$12.7 billion deal

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The general who coined the Abraham Accords

How a two-star U.S. general from Puerto Rico earned the trust of the Emiratis to later help broker the Abraham Accords — and name it too

By Gabby Deutch

Below the holiest place in Judaism, a group of visitors gathered in December 2020 to celebrate Hanukkah. Guests of honor inside the dimly lit stone archway of the Western Wall Tunnels in Jerusalem included a who's who of Jewish officials from the Trump administration, including White House advisors Jared Kushner and Avi Berkowitz, and U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman.

Together, the group lit the candles, recited the blessings and sang Hanukkah songs. Afterward, the rabbi of the Western Wall and Israel's Holy Places, Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, noticed a familiar face out of the corner of his eye. Rabinowitz proceeded with purpose, blowing past Kushner, Berkowitz and Friedman, to reach two-star U.S. Army Gen. Miguel Correa. The rabbi from Jerusalem and the general, a Catholic Puerto Rico native, embraced in a brotherly hug.

"What is this, you didn't come over and give me a hug first?" Correa recalled Kushner teasingly chiding Rabinowitz. But Kushner wasn't the only one caught off guard by Correa's warm relationship with the head

rabbi of the Western Wall. As Correa recalled it: "Everybody was like, 'What the hell?'"

Correa first met Rabinowitz a couple of months earlier, at a September dinner in Jerusalem celebrating the first commercial flight traveling from Bahrain to Israel following the normalization deal between the two countries in August 2020. Correa had since become an avid reader of the rabbi's weekly newsletters on the Torah portion, something "I really looked forward to," said Correa.

These visits to Jerusalem capped off an eventful year for the general, who joined the National Security Council early in 2020 and played a pivotal role in negotiating and bringing about the Abraham Accords, the agreements that saw Israel normalize ties with several Arab countries. Correa's time in the White House followed a military career that spanned the Sinai Desert, Pakistan and the Alaskan wilderness, with stops along the way in Eastern Europe, South America and the United Arab Emirates.

It was in the UAE, where he was stationed for two years as a defense attaché, that Correa made the connections that would prove so fruitful to the negotiations

between Israel, the UAE and the United States. But the seeds for his involvement in the back-channel talks were planted decades earlier, during a childhood that took him from a city near San Juan, Puerto Rico, to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he was called a "saltwater Mexican" when he hung out with other Spanish-speaking kids; from the arid desert heat of Kuwait, where Correa first learned Arabic and got to know people from across the Arab world, to the sticky humidity of South Florida, where, as a high school student, he met a Jewish person for the first time.

The event in the Western Wall Tunnels was the general's first time celebrating a Jewish holiday, but it fit neatly into his lifetime reverence for history and cultures vastly different from his own and an uncanny ability to fit in among people wholly unlike him. In fact, it was Correa who coined the name "Abraham Accords," knitting together the three Abrahamic faiths — Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

"My dad really drove all these cultures into our minds, and I think it helped me get where I'm at," the press-shy general explained to *The Circuit / Jewish Insider*

at his home in Pompano Beach, Fla., in his first in-depth interview on his professional experiences and personal journey. Correa's parents were the formative force in every career choice he made: "My parents had beat that into our heads, 'Hey, what is going to be your contribution to this American experiment?'"

Understanding how Correa found himself in a position with access to the president of the United States and some of the most powerful leaders in the Persian Gulf requires looking back — at the culture of patriotism and exploration in which he was raised; at his distaste for bureaucracy and process, which led to a major career setback just before his time in the White House; and at his ability to make a friend of just about anyone, a gift he inherited from his father.

On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, Correa, 54, was the picture of relaxation. He moved to Pompano Beach, just north of Fort Lauderdale, after retiring from the military in October. Life after the military seemed to suit him: He wore khaki shorts and a T-shirt from his alma mater, the University of Florida. Aside from a crew cut, good posture and a strong, stocky build, nothing about Correa clued you into his years spent in special-ops.

Correa's living room looked like it belonged on the cover of a Jimmy Buffett album. On the wall were several tchotchkes and signs from bars in the Florida Keys, where he first met his wife. A bowl of painted seashells sat on the coffee table; a branded Margaritaville blender was on the counter. Against the wall was a tiki-themed bar, and above it, the room's only relic of Correa's decades in public service: A framed photograph showing Correa, former President Donald Trump and the other U.S. officials involved with negotiating the Abraham Accords. All held up two fingers, flashing a peace sign. Below the photograph was the pen Trump used to sign the agreement selling F-35 fighter jets to the UAE (a deal that was adjacent to but not technically part of the Abraham Accords).

"Whoever thought, in my life, that this one short Puerto Rican would be sitting

in the Oval on a historic moment?" Correa asked, with a bemused sense of wonder about the fact that a *boricua* like him made it all the way to the White House. He has returned to this question at each major accomplishment or turning point in his life, constantly taking stock of how far he and his family have come from their Caribbean birthplace.

In the first of several conversations with JI, Correa alternated between detailed reminiscences of his time in the White House and scenes from his childhood, peppered with centuries-long history lessons on topics ranging from the Palmach Jewish fighting brigade in Mandatory Palestine to the Gulf royal families.

"I love history," Correa said. "I just love knowing your background because it affects the way that you do things and the way that you see things, and I want to understand what glasses you're wearing, right? Because that tells me what your motivations are, the way that you do things, and then I'll deal with it accordingly."

Throughout his life, Correa has tried on scores of new pairs of glasses, starting in Carolinas, the San Juan suburb where Correa was born to two young parents with little money.

"We had a war going on in Vietnam, and my dad was like, 'Look, I feel like I need to do service,' and I want to explore this brave new world called the continental United States," Correa recalled. His father joined the Federal Highway Administration as an engineer, taking the family first to California and then to Santa Fe.

"Being Latin in Santa Fe, New Mexico, they would jokingly call us — they'd say, 'You're like us, you're basically saltwater Mexicans. You're just like us.' We just really enjoyed being around a lot of people," said Correa. "My rapport-building skills come from my Puerto Rican heritage. Because my dad, there wasn't a single person he wouldn't talk to."

The next stop for the family, in 1980, was an even bigger change: Kuwait City, Kuwait. "My dad being the adventurer, he was like, 'Why not? Let's do this,'" said Correa.

The elder Correa was tapped for a position as an engineer based at the U.S. Embassy, designing roads in Kuwait soon after Iranian militants took several dozen

Americans hostage at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979. He set off for Kuwait alone, as families were not allowed to join at the time, and his wife and their three children arrived six months later.

Most American diplomats tended to stick to the expat community. Not the Correas, who really integrated into local culture. The family would get invited to Kuwaiti weddings, and Correa, his brothers and their dad would go off with the men while his mom, an educator who taught at an international school in Kuwait, went to the women's side.

Correa's father was a lifelong American citizen, but he looked different from other embassy personnel. He spoke English with an accent. And that joint outsider-insider status endeared him to his new Arab friends.

"We're not being paid to hang out with Westerners. We need to go establish rapport with the locals and with these other countries," explained Correa, who would notably bring the same ethos to his posting in Abu Dhabi decades later.

Correa's parents stayed in the country for eight years, and it was during that time that Correa began to get a taste for being at the center of the action, with a front-row view to historic geopolitical events. There was the Islamic Revolution happening in Iran, and then the Iran-Iraq War, and Israel's war with Lebanon and the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut in 1983.

"I could sit on one of the islands of Kuwait and watch the fireworks between Iran and Iraq. A lot of the kids of the CIA were there, and the embassy, and the government, and wow," Correa said, using his hands to mime a head exploding. (Later, when he joined the military, Correa initially tried to hide his Arabic skills, seeking exposure to other parts of the world. It didn't work.)

He sat in on his father's poker games, listening to the multinational attendees' conversations. He spent summers working in the consular section at the U.S. Embassy. Palestine Liberation Organization members lived nearby. "What teenage kids are going to be bombarded with all of these Palestinian-Israeli, these situations?" asked Correa.

Correa completed eighth and ninth grades at the American School of Kuwait, which catered to the kids of diplomats and wealthy Kuwaitis. It was there that Correa

learned Arabic and studied Islam, and it was also the first time he learned about Israel. Sort of.

"You spent the first three or four days of every single semester taking your textbook, and you'd have a teacher at the front, and there was a Ministry of Education [directive] that would mandate what parts of your book you had to take out," Correa recalled. Armed with a pair of scissors and a marker, he went through his textbooks, looking for offensive language and imagery. Any depictions of the Prophet Muhammad were cut out. Maps that showed the State of Israel were colored over in dark permanent marker.

"Anything to do with Israel," he said, "you marked it, or you cut the whole page out if it was trying to explain something from the Western way."

The "Western way" as it related to Israel meant describing the country as anything but an illegitimate Zionist entity occupying Palestinian land. "It was 100% one-sided, in that it was genocide, that the Israelis pushed out the Palestinians, period," said Correa. Alongside Palestinian friends who spoke of grandparents who had been forced out of Israel, and the ongoing Arab League boycott of Israel that required avoiding products from companies like Coca-Cola and Revlon, these lessons made sense to the young Correa.

"You're a little kid, and so you think anything the government says, it's law, it's perfect," he explained.

A couple years later, he found himself staring at an Israeli flag hanging in a friend's dorm room at the Pine Crest School in Fort Lauderdale, where he attended high school as a boarding student. He did not understand.

"I remember taking this all in, like, 'OK, what does this mean? He doesn't have horns,'" Correa said of the first time he met Greg Wald, a Jewish teammate on the Pine Crest football team. Back in Kuwait, "anything that was derogatory to Jews was good." His friends had taught him curse words in Arabic: *Inta kalb*. You're a dog. *Inta yahoodi*. You're Jewish. "And that was at the same level," Correa said. "Think about that."

Wald, like Correa, was a boarding student, while most students at Pine Crest lived nearby, not in the dorms. The school was, and remains, heavily Jewish; Correa

said friends called it "Stein Crest" in the 1980s, when he attended.

"I don't think he had met any Jewish kids before Pine Crest. Maybe I just stuck out as one of the Jewish kids in the dorm, which I think I was one of very few," Wald said in a phone interview from his home in San Francisco. Correa glimpsed the flag on a night when he got locked out of his room and needed a place to crash, and Wald took him in for the night. Wald, who is Jewish but not Israeli, didn't recall talking to Correa about the flag, but he did remember vibrant debates among boarding students about the Middle East.

"There were quite a lot of guys there from the Middle East, not so much of Middle Eastern descent but people like Miguel, [whose] parents were living in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, some other places. We had lively discussions back then," he said, about the unrest in the Middle East and the war between Israel and Lebanon. "I probably hung the flag up just to kind of assert where I was coming from and my perspective."

The flag marked the beginning of a steep learning curve for Correa. He learned about the Holocaust for the first time and met Holocaust survivors. Wald became one of several Jewish friends.

"I fell in love with the Arab culture. I now fell in love with the Jewish culture. Holy cow. There's two sides to all of this stuff, right? What a Gordian knot," Correa said.

Later, when Correa joined the White House, he thought this perspective was one of his greatest assets: He grew up among Arabs, understood their history and agreed with the need for an independent Palestinian state. But he had also developed lifelong relationships with Jews. If he could be friends with both, why couldn't they be friends with each other?

In the early 1990s, Operation Desert Storm brought Correa back to Kuwait. This time, he was an infantryman in the U.S. Army, where he was serving in the 101st Airborne and helped push out the invading Iraqis. He also acted as an unofficial cultural translator, teaching his fellow soldiers about the country's history, geography and customs.

His next stop was the Sinai Desert, where he spent eight months as a member of the Multinational Force and Observers, the peacekeepers who maintain the 1978 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. He served alongside Israeli troops, sparking a desire to study Israeli military history.

"I was always interested in the wars, being a military guy, what happened in '48, '67, '73 — Yom Kippur and the Six-Day War," Correa explained. The role of the Wisconsin-raised Prime Minister Golda Meir in all this history became a light obsession. "I would only pray that one day, when I'm up in the pearly gates, I get to sit and listen to that absolutely incredible woman."

Correa's military career took him all around the world and the United States. A brief stint as a winter warfare instructor on the army mountaineering team in Alaska in the 1990s was the culmination of a dream of his father's.

"I can outski just about everybody. Everybody was like, 'What the hell is a Puerto Rican doing here?'" Correa recalled. Shortly after his family arrived in California from Puerto Rico, when Correa was a toddler, his dad got the urge to see snow for the first time. The family had some \$200 to their name, or so the story goes. His dad drove up to the mountains, and he saw people "in a ski resort. They're in a hot tub. And he's like, 'Man, these rich people are kind of cool. One day, I hope my kids can do that,'" Correa said.

"I've always wanted to impress my parents, and always wanted to show them that I'm worthy, and that I can do great things and the whole nine yards," Correa admitted.

When Correa arrived in Abu Dhabi as defense attaché to the U.S. Embassy in 2017, his day job involved advising the Emiratis on special forces operations and promoting defense cooperation between Washington and Abu Dhabi. But Correa is his father's son, and he would not waste an opportunity for on-the-ground diplomacy, no red tape: He was, like his father before him, a representative of America in an Arab country, ready to deploy his Puerto Rican charm and characteristic gregariousness.

“He goes out of his way to understand us, to learn the culture, to learn the values,” Yousef Al Otaiba, the UAE’s ambassador to the U.S., said of Correa during a recent interview at the Emirati embassy in Washington. “He doesn’t just come in as an official who has talking points. And it’s not transactional. He actually really loves the culture.”

The UAE has a strong military culture, and Correa tapped into it. “I could converse with senior Emirati generals, and then they got to realize, ‘Holy shit, this guy’s a real general, he’s not an embassy general,’” Correa recalled. Like his father, he dispensed with the pretense that the diplomats always knew best.

Today, Correa counts Otaiba as a personal friend, along with many members of the Emirati royal family, including the country’s de facto ruler, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Those high-level relationships were forged not in state dining rooms but on the battlefield and in the desert. In 2017, Correa orchestrated a secret rescue mission of Emirati troops from inside Yemen — a mission that was kept secret until a late 2020 report in *The Wall Street Journal*.

In August 2017, Correa was at his home in Abu Dhabi when he received a call informing him that a helicopter with Emirati soldiers had crashed in Yemen while conducting a mission against al-Qaida. Three soldiers were killed, and seven more were injured. They were trapped inside Yemen.

Correa, who directed the rescue mission from a special communications post in Abu Dhabi, dispatched an American special forces medical team to fly to the crash site in Yemen and carry the victims to the USS Bataan in the Gulf of Aden, where medical teams operated on the six injured soldiers for 48 hours, Central Command spokesperson Capt. Bill Urban told *The Journal*. (One of the seven died while being transported to the ship.)

Emirati leaders then asked permission to fly the soldiers to a U.S. Army hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, that has expertise in treating combat injuries. A series of quick phone calls between Gen. Joseph Votel, then head of Central Command, and then-Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis — with Correa serving as a go-between with Emirati

leaders — brought the six soldiers to safety.

“We moved at the speed of light and didn’t wait for the staffs to get in our way,” Correa said. “I made some calls that, frankly, I was, like, ‘Wow, I hope this turns out well, because if it doesn’t, I’m gonna pay for this in the long run.’”

One of the injured soldiers who survived the attack turned out to be Zayed bin Hamdan al Nahyan, the nephew and son-in-law of Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed. Correa “was called in and basically evacuated him, like, on the spot, and if he hadn’t done that, at least our folks tell me that he may have not survived,” Otaiba remarked. The soldier left the hospital in a wheelchair, but when Correa saw him last month on a visit to Abu Dhabi, Zayed bin Hamdan was walking again.

The mission was “a dramatic example of the United States helping a partner extract someone who is seriously wounded, get him out by U.S. means, get him to a U.S. medical facility, save his life. That’s an enormously important act that’s not forgotten,” recalled Robert Greenway, who was also involved with the creation of the Abraham Accords in his role as senior director for Middle Eastern and North African affairs on the National Security Council.

After the rescue mission, Correa was viewed as a hero by the Emiratis. The country’s foreign minister later told Trump, pointing at Correa, “That general is part of my family.” (“We are proud of the general,” Trump apparently replied.) But Correa’s involvement with the mission soon sparked jealousy with bureaucrats at the U.S. Embassy. As Correa remembers it, some diplomats wanted to leverage America’s success in the mission into tangible benefits: more diplomatic cars, tax advantages, greater access to diplomatic mail.

“I absolutely refused to be a part of that. This is what two partners do for each other,” said Correa, who viewed the mission as an outgrowth of his close personal relationships with many Emiratis. “Because that relationship was so strong, it was a source of envy.”

While Correa’s relationship with the Emiratis continued to blossom, his relationship with the senior American diplomats in Abu Dhabi deteriorated. In April 2019, he was unceremoniously forced

to leave the post after the chargé d’affaires at the Embassy accused him of cultivating ties with Emiratis without cluing in his civilian supervisor.

Back in Washington, Correa took on a senior role at the Pentagon under the chief of staff of the U.S. Army. Deputy National Security Advisor Victoria Coates heard about Correa and together with Greenway, who served in the military with Correa on several prior occasions, recruited the general to join them at the National Security Council as a senior director for Gulf affairs.

When Correa “was back in Washington and available, Rob and I founded an effort to get him on the NSC,” Coates recalled. That was in April 2019, and he didn’t join the NSC until March 2020, recalled Coates: “It took such a long time because there were all these investigations, which were pointless and went nowhere.” An investigation from the Pentagon inspector general cleared Correa of any wrongdoing.

“He served his country with distinction for over 30 years and has the highest respect from people around the world,” Jared Kushner told *JI* by phone in December.

Kushner was not initially aware of Correa, and the role for which Correa was first hired had nothing to do with the Abraham Accords. In the summer of 2020, for instance, he participated in a series of high-level virtual dialogue sessions about demilitarization in Libya. It was a combination of deep experience in the UAE and in Yemen, and his “impeccable language skills,” said Coates, that made him a strong contender for the NSC position.

The negotiating team for the normalization deals was small, and most members of the NSC — Correa included — were not aware of the ongoing negotiations. Correa had never even met Kushner. “I’m a general. I’m supposed to stay out of politics,” Correa noted.

It was Otaiba who ultimately led to Correa joining the negotiating team. The Emirati ambassador informed Kushner that he had his country’s “most trusted American” already working in the White House, according to Correa.

“The running joke by Sheikh Mohammed is that I didn’t fall down, I fell up when I had this guy, a certain diplomat, really jealous of my relationships and rapport,” Correa said.

“He was trying to actually hurt me. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise.”

By the time Correa came to the White House, Otaiba and Kushner had been unofficially discussing a normalization agreement with Israel for a year. He and Bahraini Ambassador Abdullah bin Rashid Al Khalifa were at the White House in January 2020 when Trump unveiled his Israeli-Palestinian peace proposal. At that event, then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to annex large portions of the West Bank, catching Trump by surprise, according to reporting by Israeli journalist Barak Ravid.

Shutting down annexation efforts became the focal point of negotiations between Otaiba, Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Ron Dermer and the American negotiating team led by Kushner and Berkowitz.

In June 2020, on the advice of Israeli-American businessman Haim Saban, Otaiba wrote a Hebrew-language op-ed in Yedioth Ahronoth arguing that annexation would be a “serious setback for better relations with the Arab world.” In the op-ed, Otaiba encouraged Israel to consider instead “the carrots — greater security, direct links, expanded markets, growing acceptance” that could happen if it dropped its annexation plans.

A few weeks later, on July 2nd, Otaiba spoke by phone with Berkowitz. The two discussed how to prevent annexation. “How do we trade this? How do we give something better?” Otaiba recalled during a Jewish Insider webcast later that year.

“I spoke and talked to them and met with them,” Otaiba said of Berkowitz, Correa and Kushner, “probably more in those four weeks than I did with anybody else, including my own family.”

Correa traveled to the region with Berkowitz, who served as a special assistant to the president and who, with Kushner, was the lead negotiator of the Accords. Throughout the negotiations, the Emiratis were not talking to the Israelis — everyone went through the Americans, and for the Emiratis, Correa was a key point of contact.

“Having someone who’s worked on

the ground definitely bolstered the trust between the parties and was immensely valuable,” Berkowitz told JI.

Correa understood the Arab position in a way he felt the other members of the negotiating team could not. “On the Israeli side, Avi and Jared, obviously, they had to force them to get to yes. That wasn’t easy,” noted Correa. “I was of no value, frankly, on that side, and they didn’t quite understand the Arab side.”

Trump’s Middle East peacemaking efforts were dogged by criticisms of bias toward Israel, particularly given the involvement of Kushner, whose family has significant ties to the country.

Correa gets that perception. But, he said, it’s not true. Kushner “went at it being very balanced and fair. Had I not known him, I wouldn’t believe what I’m telling you right now. I’d say it’s bullshit, and he went completely on the Israeli side,” Correa explained. “He just wants to solve this for both sides.”

In hindsight, it’s easy to look at the events of 2020 — the Arab ambassadors at Trump’s peace plan unveiling, Otaiba’s op-ed — and view the outcome as inevitable. But the deals were far from guaranteed.

“I would rather have walked in my underwear in Fallujah or Baghdad than some of the days there in D.C. where I said, ‘I don’t know if I’m gonna survive this,’” said Correa, not entirely kidding.

“One side would walk away, the other one [would say], ‘No, no, no, no, I’m joking. Here, come on, sit down, let me give you a back rub. Hey, how about this? Come on, let’s find some space. What’s acceptable?’ Because the first answer to both of them is, ‘Hell, no, we won’t do it.’”

A constant fear of leaks pervaded the whole endeavor, and negotiators worked on details of the deal to the very last minute, when the Accords were reached on Aug. 13, 2020. The final detail to be cemented would become one of the most important: the name.

For weeks, Correa had tried to get the negotiators to spend some time on a name. But other issues took priority, and some negotiators seemed to think that naming it might jinx the whole operation. What if it fell apart after it had an official title?

Options included Camp David II, the

Bedminster Accords, the North Lawn Accords, the South Lawn Accords and the Trump Accords. (“You can imagine how that would spit,” said Correa.) Kushner wanted to use the word Future, or perhaps Forward.

The name came to Correa out of nowhere: the Abraham Accords. “All three of the religions have a different name. It’s translated in their religion. And we immediately make this people-to-people and religious,” Correa said, rather than just a political agreement. One member of the team then said, yes, it’s perfect, because Trump’s first international trip as president, in 2017, was to Saudi Arabia, Israel and Vatican City. (Correa dismissed this: “If anybody tells you we planned it, that’s bullshit, alright?”)

There was hardly a moment to spare. “This is on August 13 at roughly 10 a.m., with the announcement, with the phone call [between Trump, Netanyahu and Mohamed bin Zayed] being at I think 10:30 a.m., so there wasn’t much time — it was a last-minute decision,” Berkowitz recalled. “We were so busy making sure the negotiations actually happened, we didn’t have too much time to work on the name.”

Correa and other members of the team were sitting in Berkowitz’s West Wing office, full of nervous energy, prepping to make sure all the parties would be present on the phone call.

“I thought it was excellent, that’s fabulous, that’s great, are both sides on board with it?” said Kushner, who then called the ambassadors to check if they approved of the name.

“It was perfect,” said Otaiba. “When he said Abraham Accords, I was like, ‘Yeah, I don’t think we could’ve found a better name.’” In 2019, the UAE announced plans to construct the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi, which — when completed later this year — will be home to a synagogue, a mosque and a church. The word Abraham translates to each language: Avraham in Hebrew, Ibrahim in Arabic.

The posse then convened in the Oval Office to get final approval from Trump.

“The president goes, ‘OK, what do we call this?’ Everybody stopped, and they looked at me,” Correa recalled. “I go, ‘Sir, Mr. President, it’s the Abraham Accords.’” Then the president asked why, and everyone started explaining the basis for Correa’s

name.

Later that day, the senior negotiating team members got on the phone with journalists to discuss the Accords. "David Friedman gives this lengthy explanation as if we had planned this thing out for years," Correa said with a laugh.

Correa had insisted that the name be plural, aware of the fact that future normalization agreements might follow if his central thesis — that the Arab world could befriend Israel without solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — proved correct. Sudan agreed to normalize ties with Israel in October, and the resumption of full diplomatic ties with Morocco followed in December. ("Saudi is going to come," Correa insists.)

Despite criticism from some lawmakers and policy experts on the left that the normalization agreements are inherently flawed because they do not include the Palestinians, Correa asserts that the Palestinians are actually at the heart of the peace deals, even if they are not signatories to them. The Accords, according to Correa, were created as a way to pressure the Palestinians to come to the negotiating table with Israel.

"I didn't fall, like, madly in love with the

Abraham Accords. It's not perfect," Correa acknowledged. "But we're better off today, because now at least the Arabs — some of the Arabs — understand the Israelis better, and Israelis understand the Arabs better. And the plan was that if we get everybody around [the Palestinians] to recognize the nation of Israel, then where does that leave the Palestinians? They'll have to come, because they're on an island."

Following his retirement from the army last October, Correa is once again working for Kushner, this time in the private sector. He is a senior partner at Affinity Partners, a new investment firm helmed by Kushner that has brought in \$3 billion in international investments following fundraising pitches to Middle East sovereign wealth funds. Kushner hopes to establish "an investment corridor between Israel and Saudi Arabia, by working with Israeli and Gulf companies and investors," according to Reuters.

Correa remains a frequent visitor to the UAE, where he is greeted with a proverbial red carpet. Coates, who traveled with Correa in August of 2020 during his first visit back to the country after his 2019 dismissal, said,

"the only problem he had is that he only had 24 hours in the day, and he had about 40 hours of people wanting to see him."

Last month Correa spent two weeks in the country, where he attended a number of high-profile events, including a VIP celebration in the desert of the 50th anniversary of the UAE's statehood, the Formula 1 Grand Prix in Abu Dhabi and the World Expo in Dubai.

"He spends more time in the desert camping, falconing, taking camels out than I do, than most Emiratis do. He appreciates the culture. And our people appreciate that about him," Otaiba gushed.

Correa knows his story is one that could only happen in America. A Puerto Rican kid who grows up in Kuwait, travels the globe as a two-star general in the U.S. Army, helps ink a major peace deal, then starts working on a new private sector startup? "It's the American dream," said Correa. "How many people from Puerto Rico ever get a chance to negotiate three peace deals?"

His only regret is that his father — the man who taught him the values that he would bring to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. — did not live long enough to see him become a U.S. Army general. ♦

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For Israeli high-tech, 2021 was a 'bumper' year says head of Innovation Authority

In the face of the pandemic, soaring investments in capital and a new crop of unicorns, creating the 'best year ever' for the sector

By Ruth Marks Eglash

There aren't too many people who would characterize 2021 as a "bumper" year for their field, but that is exactly the word that Dror Bin, CEO of the Israel Innovation Authority, uses to describe the country's high-tech sector during the second year of a global pandemic that brought additional lockdowns, border closures and successive waves of virus variants.

"I don't think anyone would have expected Israeli high-tech to peak in such a way," Bin, who was appointed CEO of the authority a year ago, told *The Circuit* in a recent interview. "It was possibly the best year ever for Israeli high-tech."

Bin's decisive statement is backed up by staggering data collected by the authority, an independent public entity that works to bolster Israel's innovation ecosystem and

serves as a bridge to the government.

During 2021, Israeli companies raised more than \$22 billion in capital; exits, mergers and acquisitions, and initial public offerings totaled \$80 billion; the accumulated market capital of Israeli companies trading on Wall Street was \$300 billion; and there was a record 79 unicorns, companies valued at \$1 billion and up.

In addition, the IIA noted that Israel's

high-tech sector now accounts for some 50% of Israel's total exports and for 15% of the country's GDP. Ten percent of Israelis work in high-tech, paying some 25% of the country's total income tax. National expenditure on civilian R&D stands at 4.9% of GDP, second only to Korea and ahead of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average of 2.47%. It also places third, after the U.S. and China, in the number of companies (116) listed on NASDAQ.

The normalization agreements between Israel and four Arab states in 2020 has also boosted the sector. The newly established UAE-Israel Business Council, which has united more than 6,000 Emirati and Israel businesspeople, is predicting that bilateral trade could reach \$2 billion in 2022, an increase of over 50% from 2021 and many of the newly formed ties are in the tech sector.

"I've been working in Israeli high-tech for 25 years and two decades ago would never have dreamt that we would reach where we are today," said Bin, former president and CEO of RAD Communications, a Tel Aviv-based company that manufactures networking equipment.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many businesses and services into the virtual space, actually "stimulated the demand for high-tech," Bin explained, adding that Israeli companies were quick to adapt to the new environment and the government stepped in to keep investment flowing into the startup sphere.

"There was a digital transformation, and many things that once took place in the physical world had to move to the virtual world, which increased demand," he told JI. "The Israeli DNA has the ability to be flexible and to adapt quickly to changing circumstances, also there is a long history of entrepreneurs, investors and government policies that benefit the sector."

"When [COVID] started, the market went into shock; many investors were reluctant to invest because the uncertainty was high," Bin explained. "We got money from the government and, for a short while, invested in different types of startups until investors were ready to return — this was one of the main reasons we did not see a fall in the number of startups in the country."

Established in 2016, the Israel Innovation

Authority has three main functions — investing in research and development of innovative and ground-breaking products with an annual investment budget of NIS 2 billion (\$640,000); preparing for future technology trends; and enabling regulation, including removing obstacles and finding ways to expand human capital for the high-tech sector.

After the "bumper" year, Bin said he expects the industry to keep growing and expanding, with an emphasis on maintaining Israel's high-tech inside the country, in contrast to the past, and diversifying into new areas of innovation.

"There has been a paradigm shift that will change many things going forward," he said. "Traditionally, Israel's start-up ecosystem was based on the establishment of small companies whose goal was to find a multinational or American company to buy it out."

Now, Bin said, there are around 10-15 companies that have become giants in their space and are choosing to remain in Israel. He estimates that a further 100 Israeli companies have the potential to become leaders in one of the global markets.

Bin also said that Israel's high-tech market was beginning to branch out in new directions.

"If Israel was strong in cyber and fintech or the enterprise software market in the past, we have seen a shift into new markets like food-tech, specifically alternative proteins, agritech, and Bio-Convergence (developing new medicine and medical devices)," he said. "The imagination can keep on working here full-time to find many more exciting new things."

In order to further facilitate the growth, IIA has been working to ease Israeli bureaucracy, loosening regulations in order to allow Israeli companies to flourish. Bin gives the example of the drone market, a focus in recent years for the authority. Bringing together Israeli regulators, the Israeli Aviation Authority and industry innovators, he said, was already "defining the playground so that all parties could benefit from it."

He also said IIA has invested in one of Israeli high-tech's biggest challenges — the shortage of manpower. "We intervened in this about two years ago and started

implementing new models of recruiting manpower to enter the industry," said Bin, describing a program for re-training for those with academic qualifications and another to bring in underrepresented populations such as women (who make up roughly 30% of the sector's employees), Arabs and the ultra-Orthodox.

Bin said there was no single element to Israel's success in creating a booming global innovation hub. "What you need to create this magic is for it all to happen in the right place at the right time," he told JI.

Citing a combination of Israel's risk-taking culture, the country's necessity to develop defense systems and a very smart government policy, Bin added: "There is also the fact that Israel is so small, and being small is an advantage when it comes to innovation, which often evolves in dense places where everyone knows everyone," he said. "All these things have blended together well to create wave after wave of innovation."

"No matter how you want to look at the Israeli ecosystem, whether its capital raised, quality of capital, unicorns, IPOs, whatever metric you want to look at, the Israeli tech ecosystem grew exponentially in 2021, it was our best year yet by far," concurred Hillel Fuld a tech columnist and startup advisor.

Explaining the growth, Fuld referred to last week's Torah portion, where it talks about the Jews in Egypt and how the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied.

"We have this tendency as Jews to thrive under pressure," he said. "There is an inverse correlation between terror and innovation, meaning you would think that if there is more terror there would be less innovation but that is not the case at all, so in 2021, the year of a pandemic, you would think it would be slow or there would be a decrease in innovation but in reality, that was not the case."

"To say I was surprised, I was not surprised because all indications showed that we were going to keep growing but the rate of growth did surprise me because it was just so explosive this year," said Fuld. ♦

Strauss Zelnick's Take-Two buys Mark Pincus's Zynga in \$12.7 billion deal

One of the largest deals in video game history will align a mobile-gaming firm with a PC- and console-focused developer under the same leadership

By Jacob Miller

Video game company Take-Two Interactive has reached a \$12.7 billion deal to acquire rival company Zynga, catapulting the “Grand Theft Auto” creator into one of the industry’s most formidable game publishers.

The deal, one of the largest in video game history, was announced on Monday by Take-Two CEO Strauss Zelnick and Zynga CEO Frank Gibeau. Expected to be finalized later this year, the merger will unite Take-Two, which specializes in PC and console gaming, with Zynga, a free-to-play mobile-game behemoth.

The two executives, which described the purchase as a “hand-in-glove fit” in a Monday morning conference call, anticipate the merger will result in an annual cost savings of \$100 million and an additional \$500 million from improved collaboration between the two firms.

Under the terms of the deal, Take-Two will buy all outstanding shares of Zynga’s stock for \$9.86 a share, a 64% premium on the company’s share price as of Friday afternoon. The acquisition will be paid in both cash and Take-Two’s stock, granting Zynga’s shareholders one-third ownership of Take-Two.

Zynga was founded by Mark Pincus in 2007 when it piloted an online poker game played on Facebook. Since then, Zynga has grown into a large company with \$2.3 billion in sales in FY2020.

In a Medium post discussing the deal, Pincus described the “bittersweet moment” and thanked his colleagues over the years for his business’s success. “We’re seeing games expand in every direction from hyper casual to entire persistent worlds,” wrote Pincus. “I believe the company will have the franchises and scale to lead in every category.”

The different specializations of the two firms will complement each other as they now work together. Take-Two, which boasts hits including “Grand Theft Auto,” “NBA2K” and “Borderlands” produces games designed for PCs and consoles, but does not have free mobile versions. Zynga’s business model, which offers free mobile entertainment with in-app premium purchase options, has pioneered successes including “FarmVille” and “Words With Friends.”

With mobile gaming ascendant, Take-Two will benefit from Zynga’s mobile development team, which is expected to develop mobile options for Take-Two’s offerings. Under the planned acquisition, more than half of Take-Two’s projected bookings in Fiscal Year 2023 will come from mobile, diversifying Take-Two’s offerings and making it competitive with other developers as mobile gaming gains traction.

Zelnick called rolling out mobile options for Take-Two games a “high-priority initiative,” saying, “We see tremendous untapped potential to bring Take-Two’s renowned console and PC properties to mobile.”

Take-Two will also benefit from Zynga’s in-house advertising team, removing the added costs of outsourcing advertising operations.

The deal comes after the gaming industry enjoyed a boom during the pandemic, as social distancing interventions and lockdown restrictions pushed consumers to spend more time gaming, a trend that translated to large share price increases for both Take-Two and Zynga over the past two years. Yet Zynga’s stock tumbled last summer amidst societal reopening following COVID-19 shutdowns and after Apple instituted privacy reforms restricting how advertisers can track consumers on its

devices, which made gaming less profitable.

Zynga has consistently maintained that its stock downturn from reopenings and Apple’s new privacy policy are transitory, and has remained optimistic about a stock rebound. On the Monday call, Zynga’s Gibeau said that these factors will not contribute to long-term drags on gaming, and explained that Zynga accepted a deal despite a feeling that its stock is undervalued because of the growth opportunities afforded in the new partnership.

“We saw incredible strengths available to us with regards to scale, data, audience expansion into new categories and product capabilities that would help us aggressively pursue cross platform. So from our perspective, we would be able to grow faster together. And the deal that was constructed in the framework with a 64% premium really put us into a position where we felt that this was the right course of action for our shareholders,” explained Gibeau.

The mammoth merger was evaluated by a strategic committee of independent directors from Zynga’s board and decided with unanimous approval from Zynga’s board of directors. Combined, the two companies reach over one billion users and employ 8,000 developers.

Zelnick will continue serving as Take-Two’s CEO, with the rest of Take-Two’s management remaining intact, while Zynga’s leadership team will assume responsibility for Take-Two’s mobile operations. Take-Two will also expand its board to accept two new directors from Zynga’s board. ♦