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Putin Faces Challenge With New Egyptian Leader

By Alexander Bratersky

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President Vladimir Putin, traveling in Israel on Monday in a bid to revive ties with the Middle East, said that he hoped for a "constructive relationship" with newly elected Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi.

The election puts the Kremlin in somewhat of an awkward position, forcing it to start from scratch in its efforts to build ties with Morsi. Unlike overthrown President Hosni Mubarak, who trained to be a pilot in the Soviet Union, Morsi has no ties to Russia.

In addition, Morsi is a longtime member of the Muslim Brotherhood, which Russia's Supreme Court has declared a terrorist organization.

"The Russian head of state has expressed hope for constructive cooperation with Egypt's new leadership in the development of Russian-Egyptian relations and safeguarding peace and stability in the Middle East," the Kremlin said in a terse one-sentence statement on its

website Monday.

The news of Morsi's election came on the eve of Putin's visit to the Middle East. Putin, who arrived in Israel on Monday for talks that focused on Syria and Iran, intends to visit the Palestinian territories and Jordan as well.

Russia needs to treat Morsi's victory carefully because the Muslim Brotherhood is supporting forces battling Russia's ally, Syrian leader Bashar Assad, said Theodor Karasik, a senior expert with the Dubai-based Institute for Near East & Gulf Military Analysis.

"Morsi's win will bring vigor to the Syrian opposition and place the Kremlin in a more precarious position regarding Syria," he said.

Even before Morsi's victory, the Kremlin was watching Egypt in fear that something similar to the Arab Spring, which toppled Mubarak after 30 years and authoritarian regimes in other Arab countries, might unfold in Russia, said Alexander Shumilin, a Middle East analyst at the ?Institute for? U.S. and? Canadian Studies. "For Russia, it was a direct analogy," Shumilin said.

It is unclear whether the victory of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Morsi might force Russia to reconsider its attitude toward the organization, declared a terrorist group by Russia's Supreme Court in 2003. The court ruling said the Muslim Brotherhood was actively involved in recruiting supporters for its radical cause against non-Islamist governments within Russia and other former Soviet republics.

Morsi has said, however, that he would leave the Muslim Brotherhood to become president.

Still, the U.S.-educated Morsi faces a struggle to mend fences with supporters of his rival, Mubarak's last prime minister, Ahmed Shafik, who got 47.5 percent of the vote in comparison to his 51.7 percent. Without a functioning parliament in Egypt for now, Morsi also holds little real power and is in the "position of a British queen," political analyst Andrei Murtazin wrote in a RIA-Novosti column.

The political turmoil in Egypt has affected the flow of Russian tourists to the country, seen as an affordable vacation destination for many Russians. In 2011, the number of Russian tourists declined 40 percent, according to the Association of Russian Tourist Operators.

Morsi's election also brings a headache to Israel because he has said he would reconsider Egypt's existing peace treaty with Israel, signed in 1979.

Morsi told the Iranian Fars news agency on Monday that the new treaty should be based on the principles of "equality."

Although Morsi's election did not catch Russia by surprise, Moscow should rethink its Middle East policy in general, experts said.

"Russia has supported failing figures," said Shumilin, of the ?Institute for? U.S. and? Canadian Studies.

Ousted Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi and Syria's current government, entrenched

in Western sanctions, received support from Russia.

"There is a need to create new policy, but it will be built from a losing position," Shumilin said.

Independent Middle Eastern expert Ernest Sultanov said the Islamist victory in Egypt and a possible change of the Syrian regime will force Russia to groom new specialists in Arab studies to replace staff trained during the Soviet era.

"In this situation it will be staff that will be the main thing," he said.

Israeli President Shimon Peres told Putin that he had arrived in Israel "in time," and said the Jewish state expects Russia to take part in efforts to bring peace to the Middle East, referring to the West's disagreements with Syria and Iran.

The visit to Israel, Putin's first in seven years, is intended to further strengthen ties with the country, populated by more than 900,000 Russian Jews.

Putin and Peres unveiled a monument to honor Red Army soldiers who liberated Nazi death camps during World War II.

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