

Al Qaeda 'planned World Cup attack from Iraq'

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A senior Al-Qaeda militant had been planning an attack against the football World Cup which kicks off in South Africa next month, an Iraqi security spokesman said on Monday.

The 30-year-old Saudi national, who was arrested two weeks ago, had been in contact with Al-Qaeda number two Ayman al-Zawahiri as part of his planning for the attack, though no further details were made available. Abdullah Azzam Saleh Misfar al-Qahtani "participated in the planning of a terrorist act in South Africa during the World Cup," Baghdad security spokesman Major General Qassim Atta said at a news conference in the Iraqi capital. He added that Qahtani, who was in charge of "security" for the terror network in Baghdad, was in contact "with the terrorist Ayman al-Zawahiri to organise the plan hatched by Al-Qaeda." Zawahiri is Al-Qaeda's number two and deputy to Osama bin Laden. Atta declined to give further details on the plan or comment on how the information was obtained.

In Johannesburg, South African police said they were making inquiries about the reported threat from Iraq. "The South African police are still working on getting confirmation," Nonkululeko Mbatha, spokeswoman for the national police chief, told AFP. "I don't know anything about that. We've not been consulted or informed," police spokesman Vish Naidoo told AFP. "We must phone Iraq. That's the next step," he said. National police chief Bheki Cele said last week that he knew of no security threat to the World Cup, the world's biggest sporting event which starts on June 11.

Atta said Qahtani, who adopted the nom de guerre "Sinan al-Saudi," held a degree in business administration and also graduated from King Fahd Security College with the rank of lieutenant. He entered Iraq in 2004, shortly after the US-led invasion to oust Saddam Hussein, and was involved in operations in the towns of Al-Qaim and Husayba near Iraq's border with Syria. According to Atta, Qahtani was apprehended by the US military in 2007 under the false name Muzawar al-Shammari, and was released last year. More recently, he participated in the planning of a series of co-ordinated attacks against Baghdad hotels in January which killed 36 people, and in the organisation of five vehicle-borne bombs that killed 127 people in the capital in December. Atta added another member of Al-Qaeda had been arrested. Algerian national Tareq Hassel Abdul Qader was the network's military chief for Karkh, Baghdad's western district. The security spokesman said Abdul Qader also helped plan several attacks in Iraq, but did not say whether he was involved in the organisation of the potential World Cup attack.

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In January in Davos, South African President Jacob Zuma said his country was prepared to provide security for the month-long tournament which is forecast to draw more than 370,000 foreign fans.