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THE SIEGE OF KUT AL AMARA ON THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY AND THE DEFEATS OF THE BRITISH RELIEVING FORCE IN MEMORIES

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Abstract

The British Army, who had been defeated by the Turkish Forces during the First World War firstly in Gallipoli, opened up the frontier of Iran-Iraq to be able to recover their dignity and also possess valuable resources in the region.

Their invasions at this frontier gained momentum very quickly. The British advanced into Iraq step by step as they had planned previously. First of all, they invaded Amara on June 3, and then Nasiriyah on July 24. Following this successful advance attained in a short time, General John Nixon, the commander of the British Expeditionary Force in Iraq, began to think of taking Baghdad. British were all dreaming of being in Baghdad on the Christmas Day. However, with the Battle of Ctesiphon, their rapid move ceased and the British under General Townshend's command had to take refuge in Kut Al Amara. Hoping that reinforcements would arrive soon, General Townshend decided to hold Kut Al Amara. He took defensive measures in the town against the oncoming Turkish forces.

On December 7, Turkish Army, under Colonel Nurettin's command, laid total siege around the British Army at Kut Al Amara. Inconclusive offensives carried out until 25 December showed the Turks that Kut Al Amara could not be taken so easily. As a result of this, large-scale offensives were abandoned and it was decided that it would be more appropriate to force the town to surrender by continuing the siege.

The British troops at Kut Al Amara were expecting General Fenton Aylmer, the Commander of the British Relieving Force, to save them from that siege. They couldn't know that this wait would last too long, because all the attempts by General Aylmer, who was charged with the duty of relieving the British forces that were under siege at Kut Al Amara, were to end up in complete failure. Following General Aylmer's failure, General Gorringe was put in charge of the British forces. However, General Gorringe's relief operation also came to nothing. On 22 April, General Gorringe's final rescue effort in the Fourth Battle of Hanna failed and this led to the exhaustion of all the remaining hopes. As a last resort, they decided to send a ship (Julnar) loaded with food and ammunition up the river on the night of 24 April. This was the last rescue effort, which ended up in the capture of the ship by Turks. This hopeful wait ended up in frustration.

Several rescue efforts carried out by the British Government and British-Iraq Army Command turned out to be inconclusive and now it was time for the British forces in Kut Al Amara to surrender. The British, who were surrounded by the Turkish forces at Kut Al Amara, could stand against it for 144 days. At the end of the 144-day siege, 13,309 soldiers surrendered and as they were hoping to save their troops at Kut Al Amara, the British losses were around 21,973 during the entire siege process.

What was more painful was not that the British were besieged at Kut Al Amara, but that all the operational attempts to put an end to that siege resulted in complete failure. General Townshend personally made a great contribution to these failures, because he had never attempted to break out of the encirclement and eventually was forced to surrender together with all his troops.

Keywords: Kut Al Amara, Siege, Break-out, Iraq Frontier, War in Memoirs, War Literature.

1. The Advance of British-Iraqi Army Until Kut Al Amara Siege

At the outset of World War I, the British began preparations to invade Iraq in September 1914, considering the possibility of going to war with the Ottoman Empire. On 10 October 1914, General Delamain, the commander of the forces specially trained in India, was given the orders to get prepared to protect the interests of the British at the Persian Gulf. Upon getting ready, the troops set off from Bombay on October 6 and assembled on Bahrain Islands on October 23. When the British waged war against the Ottoman Empire on 5 November 1914, battles at the Iraq frontier broke out. On the following day, Indian Expeditionary Force "D", which consisted of the Sixth Division, landed at a place close to Shatt-al Arab. On 22 November Basra and on 9 December Kurna were occupied (Moberly 1997: 1-131). Major General C.V.F. Townshend took command of the Sixth Division on 22 April 1915. During the battles from then on, the British gradually advanced into Iraq as scheduled. They occupied Amara on June 3 and Nasiriyah on July 24.

Following this successful advance attained in a short time, General John Nixon, the commander of the British Expeditionary Force in Iraq, began to think of taking Baghdad. Meanwhile, decision-makers in India and London were of the opinion that the conquest of Baghdad would play a great role in recovering the prestige of the British in the Middle East after their defeat at Gallipoli. As a result, General Nixon

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ordered Charles Townshend, the commander of the Sixth Division, to move from Amara by way of the river and invade Kut Al Amara, which was 190 kilometers away (Üzen 2008:1).

As our troops that drew back to Kut Al Amara did not concede to a decisive battle and evacuated the area, the British finally invaded Kut Al Amara on September 29. Losing the battle, Turkish troops retreated and deployed at Ctesiphon (Turkish General Staff 1996:199).

Orders were given on 24 October 1915 for the British troops to start an operation to take hold of Baghdad. Prior to taking an invasion decision, Townshend found it unfavorable to advance forward before taking considerable reinforcements. For this reason, he was promised to be supported by two extra divisions. Particularly, officer Sir Percy Cox, in charge of political affairs, said that Townshend's conquering Baghdad would be equivalent to the conquest of Istanbul and such news would shake all the Asian continent (Townshend 2007: 73-153). The British were all dreaming of being in Baghdad on the Christmas Day (Millar 1970:3). Capturing Kut Al Amara, General Townshend began to march forward to Baghdad with a force of 15.000 soldiers in the midst of November (Sakin 2009:15).

2. The Battle of Ctesiphon and the Siege of Kut Al Amara

Townshend advanced in the direction of Ctesiphon on November 20. On November 22, he engaged in a new battle with the Turkish forces, which were under Colonel Nurettin's command. It was a bloody battle and both sides suffered great losses (Karal 1996: 487). In the end, the British forces were defeated and forced to draw back. Under the close pursuit of the Turkish forces under Colonel Nurettin's command, the British forces withdrew to Kut Al Amara. Being forced to a retreat, General Townshend and his troops took refuge in Kut Al Amara on 3 December (Townshend 2007: 359-260). Hoping that reinforcements would arrive soon, General Townshend decided to capture Kut Al Amara. He took defensive measures in the town against the oncoming Turkish forces.

Townshend thought that, by keeping hold of Kut Al Amara, he could choke the operation that could be made by the Turkish forces from Tigris to the south, and thus could prevent the Turkish forces from capturing the southern part of Iraq, and by facilitating the arrival of reinforcements to Iraq, he could save time for General Nixon, the commander of the British-Iraq Army and eventually could break out of the siege (Ahmet Izzet Pasha, 1992:213).

Kut Al Amara is a town on the banks of the river of Tigris, surrounded by the river on its three sides. The land around the town is flat and spacious. The land is free from vegetation (Turkish General Staff 1979: 362-363). Since the town was surrounded by the river on three sides and the river had a high flow rate, this gave a great advantage to the British to hold the town. On the other hand, as the British did not have the necessary means to cross the river, they could not get out of the town. With the troops that were previously left in town, there were 2850 British, 300 of whom were officers, 8250 Indian officers and 3500 servicemen, made up of privates, cooks, footmen and riders. Apart from them, there were 5000-6000 residents in town and 1500 Turks, who were taken prisoner at the Ctesiphon Battle (Townshend 2007:366).

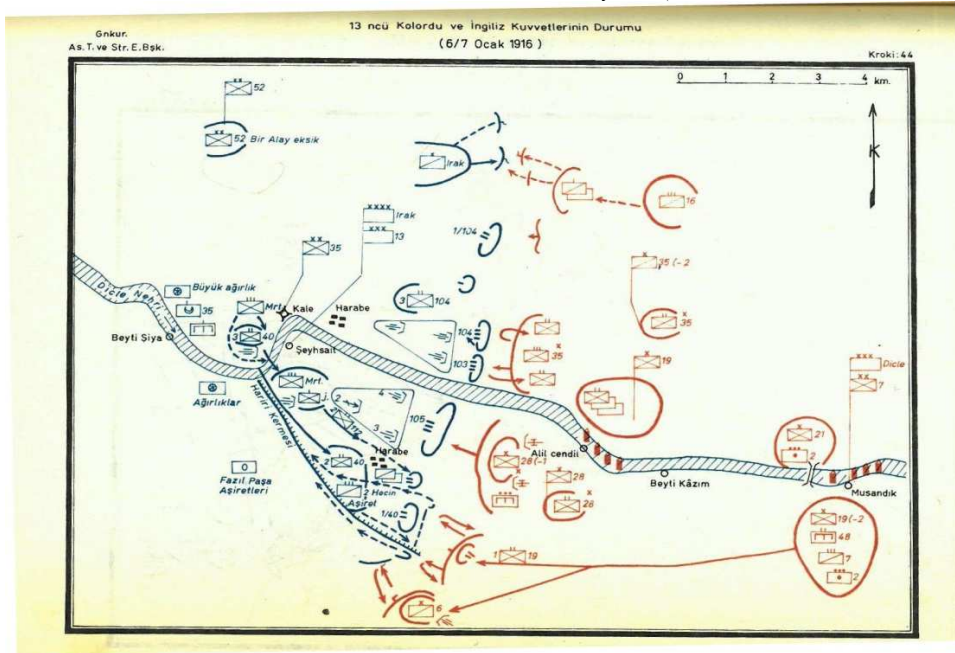
Turkish Army, under Colonel Nurettin's command, surrounded the British forces from all sides at Kut Al Amara on 7 December (Sanders 2006: 137-138). The first offer for surrender to the British forces at Kut Al Amara was made by Colonel Nurettin on 7 December, when siege was completed. To avoid unnecessary bloodshed, Colonel Nurettin wanted Townshend to surrender. However, this early offer was turned down (Townshend 2007: 379).

Inconclusive offensives carried out until 25 December showed the Turks that Kut Al Amara could not be taken so easily. As a result of this, large-scale offensives were abandoned and it was decided that it would be more appropriate to force the town to surrender by continuing the siege. Although the Turkish forces had laid siege to Kut Al Amara, their priority was not the fall of the town, but the prevention of the British Relieving Force heading from the south (Townshend 2007: 40). Only by this way could a long-lasting battle be avoided, and starving and desperate Kut Al Amara garrison be forced to surrender by vitiating the offensive power of the British Relieving Force.

3. The Operations of the British Relieving Force

General Aylmer, the Second Chief of Staff of the Indian Army, which came to Iraq on 7 December 1915, was appointed to the command of British Relieving Force. This Relieving Force was stationed as Tigris Army Corps. General Aylmer was given the first task through the orders of General Nixon. This task involved the defeat of the Turkish Forces alongside the Tigris River and recovery of the British forces under General Townshend that were under siege in Kut Al Amara (General Staff 1979: 495). It was reported in the telegram from the Head of the Army Staff that all that could be done was being done to rescue Townshend and his troops from the siege and this could be accomplished in a matter of two months. However, Townshend considered these two months too long (Townshend 2007: 359-360). But the British forces at Kut Al Amara were still in hopes of being rescued by General Fenton Aylmer, the Commander of the Twelfth Indian Division, around the midst of January (Gardner 2004: 314).

Image 1: The Positions of the Turkish and British Forces – 6/7 January 1916(Turkish General Staff 1979: sketch 44)



General Townshend, who was expecting to be rescued, did not make any serious steps to that end, because no serious attempt for a break-out had ever been made at Kut Al Amara. A few small scale break-out operations were made in order to lessen the burden of the Relieving Force that was heading from the south. As they were short of the necessary materials to build a bridge on the Tigris River, it was almost impossible to evacuate all the forces out of town. Through a strong and successful break-out operation, the Relieving Force and the British Forces already under siege could join together. Any such integration could put an end to the siege. Yet, Townshend declined all the break-out offers putting forth various pretexts. This integration was still possible in the first stages of the siege when the stamina of the soldiers had not yet been undermined. Now there was no place for a break-out attempt, as the soldiers were all languished owing to severe hunger (Üzen 2009:21).

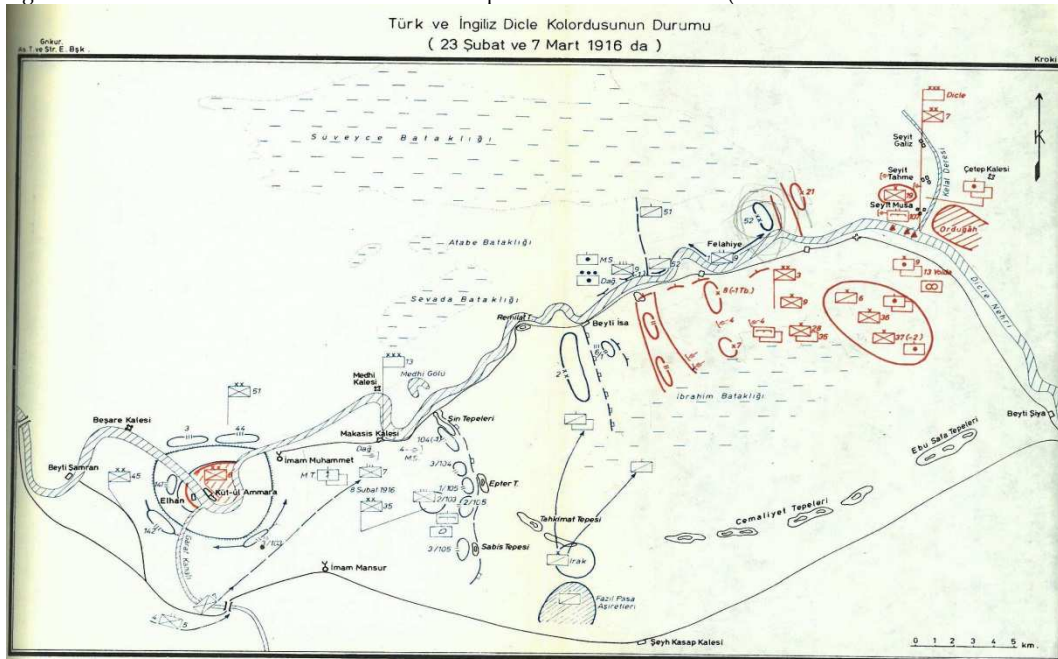
General Aylmer and his forces suffered more than 6000 casualties against the Turks in the Battle of Sheikh Said on 6 January and the Battle of Vadiikelal on 13 January. He had to put off a new assault because he had not more than 9000 combatant soldiers and because the battlefield had turned into a marshland due to the torrential rains (Townshend 2007: 421).

At the Battle of Sheikh Said on 6 January, General Townshend was asked to harass Turks with a break-out attempt during the Relieving Force's ongoing operation, but he stated that this would not be possible, saying that such an attempt would result in the loss of the two thirds of his forces. His hesitant attitude led to the failure of the Relieving Force. Following the defeat in the Battle of Vadiikelal on 13 January, General Aylmer sent a telegram on 16 January to Townshend, demanding from him to move his forces to the right bank of the Tigris River and advance toward Es-Sinn. Replying to this telegram on 18 January, Townshend said that he could cross only 4000 soldiers to the opposite bank in one night, and in addition to those working in the rear service area, he would have to leave 5000 combatants who were either sick or wounded behind in town, and he also pointed out that it would take 20 hours for the 3 field batteries to cross the river, and that all these activities had to be completed in one night for the operation to succeed, thus all the artillery, animals and ammunitions that could not be carried across in one night had to be destroyed (Townshend 2007: 425). None of such correspondences yielded any fruits and not a single promise of assistance could be received from the town.

On the telegram sent on 21 January, General Aylmer stated that he would mount an attack on the next day and wanted Townshend to lessen the burden on the Relieving Force by making an offensive move and then go back to the town. However, in the second telegram received on the day of operation, it was said that the battlefield was turned into a marshland because of the heavy rain and thus the operation was postponed. As a result, Townshend did not have to come up with an excuse this time (Townshend 2007: 433-434). Townshend definitely knew very well that there was no way out other than making a sally with his combatant troops. Yet, according to him, general and local conditions were making it unfeasible. The reason for this was being surrounded on all three sides. Only the side facing the river was open. Moving a force of 3000 people across the river in a limited time was not an easy task. For this reason, only around 3000 to 4000 people could be saved with a sally, but this would lead to the total annihilation of 4000 to 5000 sick and

wounded people and all the artillery that would be left in town. In fact, all the troops and the artillery could be saved by keeping their position in town and this would be more beneficial for the country (Townshend 2007: 447). General Aylmer suffered another defeat in the Battle of Al-Hanna on 24 January. As a result, addressing to his soldiers in his memo dated 26 January, he said that he was of the hope of being rescued until 15 February and his intention was carrying out a defensive combat as glorious as the Defense of Plovdiv (Townshend 2007: 453-455). At the end of February, General Aylmer once again asked Townshend to assist him with a sally. Townshend stated that he would join the operation as soon as the British troops were seen in the south. However, as the British never showed up in the south, he did not make a single move (Townshend 2007: 447).

Image 2: The Position of the British and Turkish Troops before the Sabis Battle (Turkish General Staff 1979: Sketch 53)



Aylmer's failure in the Battle of the Sabis on 8 March and the overflow of the River of Tigris on 14 March shattered all the British hopes of being rescued shortly (Gardner 2004: 319).

Halil Pasha, who was appointed in place of Colonel Nurettin, wanted the surrender of Kut Al Amara, expressing the quandary in a letter he sent on 10 March that the British Relieving Force was ineffective, that the liberation of the town was now impossible and that the troops in the town were suffering from food shortage. Yet, Townshend responded to this call negatively (Halil Pasha 2003: 118-119, Townshend 2007: 500-501).

No sally seems to have been demanded from the town during the rescue efforts of General Goringe, who was assigned in place of General Aylmer on 13 March. The British soldiers and particularly the Indian soldiers who did not eat horse meat had already famished as a result of the gradual reduction in rations and they were in no way ready for a sally. For this reason, the British forces in the town had to wait for a rescue operation to come from the south before they eventually surrendered.

General Goringe encountered a defeat in the Third Battle of Hanna on 9 April 1916 (Townshend: 544-554). As the Turkish siege could not be broken, the British planes started to drop provisions on 15 April. Air support gave Kut Al Amara only four extra days to stand, but this effort was not enough to feed the population in Kut Al Amara (Townshend 2007: 559-560, Barber 1918: 221-222, Blackledge 1936: 164).

Townshend, on 16 April, at a time when inevitable end was very close, sent a secret and private telegram to the Army commander and offered to join the reinforcements by mounting around 600 bravest soldiers on the Sumana ship and thus breaking the siege through the river. After this attempt, around 8000 people would be left in Kut Al Amara (Millar 1970: 235-238). Those who would be left in town would attempt to negotiate with the Turks under a brigadier commander (Townshend 2007: 542). In the reply received on 17 April, it was stated that the Army Commander was ready to accept and approve the offer as a last resort, but he added that it would be more appropriate if he commanded the troops to be left in Kut Al Amara and that this plan would not be put into practice unless indispensable (Townshend 2007: 561).

On 22 April, General Goringe's final rescue effort in the Fourth Battle of Hanna failed and this led to the exhaustion of all the remaining hopes. As a last resort, they decided to send a ship (Julnar) loaded with food and ammunition up the river on the night of 24 April. This was the last rescue effort, which ended up in the capture of the ship by Turks.

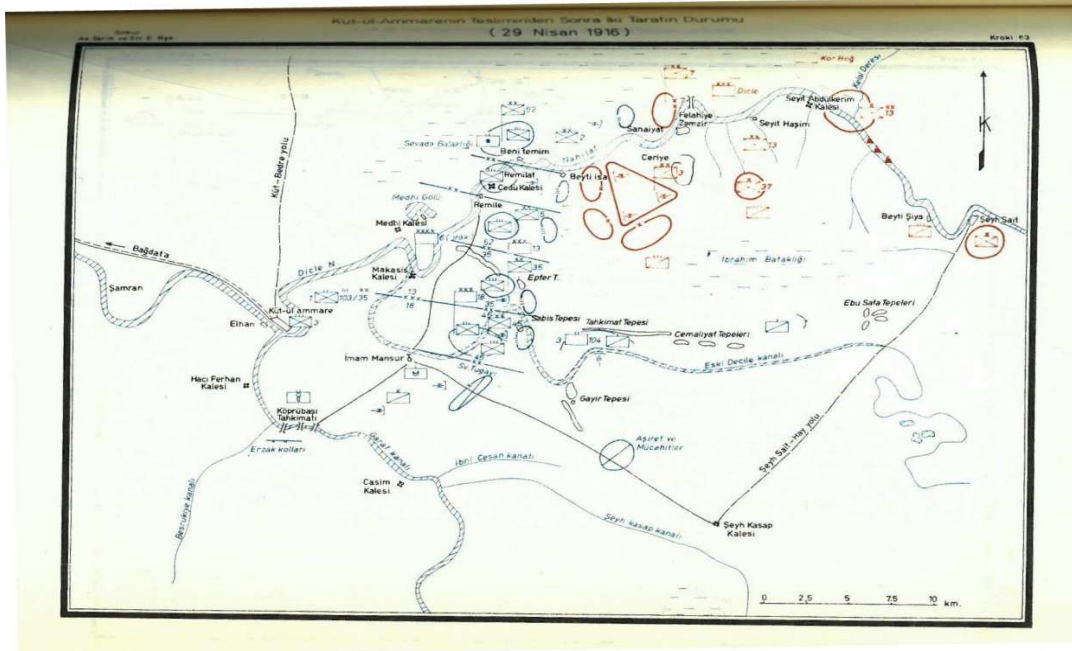
When the British Relieving Force's last effort failed on 22 April 1916, Townshend sent a telegram to the Army Headquarters on 23 April, saying that he could stand until 29 April and that it would be appropriate to hand over the town to the Turks and start negotiations with Halil Pasha to be able to draw back from the town freely. Upon the approval of this offer, he met Halil Pasha on 26 April. Halil Pasha said that the defense was carried out valiantly and it was almost equivalent to the Defense of Plovdiv. However, in accordance with the orders he had received from Istanbul, Halil Pasha insisted on unconditional surrender. According to the orders, only Townshend could be set free, but he refused this. On his letter to Halil Pasha dated 28 April, General Townshend came up with these offers: "Not fighting against Turks as long as the war goes on, handing over 40 canons in full function, paying 1 million British liras as war indemnity and in return for all these, his release together with his division to be given." Upon the rejection of these offers, the British Government eventually had to surrender after long-lasting negotiations with the Turks, destroying all their canons, equipment and ammunition (Townshend 2007: 565-570).

4. The Handover of Kut Al Amara by the British

Several rescue efforts carried out by the British Government and British-Iraq Army Command turned out to be inconclusive and now it was time for the British forces in Kut Al Amara to surrender. Third Infantry regiment was assigned for the handover procedures of Kut Al Amara. At 14:30 on 29 April, Third Infantry Regiment marched in Kut Al Amara, singing national anthems (General Staff 1979:779).

When General Townshend, who was forced to surrender to the Turkish forces, held his sword and pistol out to Halil Pasha, he replied: "Your sword and pistol belong to you as they always have been so far." Halil Pasha told him that he would be sent to Istanbul and welcomed with due respect and tribute as paid to Ghazi Osman Pasha. Furthermore, he added that he would be accepted as an esteemed guest by Turks, saying that his troops would be sent to proper places in Anatolia where maritime climate prevails (Halil Pasha 2003: 130).

Image 3: The Position of Both Sides after the Handover - 29 April 1916 (Turkish General Staff 1979: Sketch 63)



When the time from 7 December to 29 April is taken as a basis, it can be said that the siege and defense of Kut Al Amara lasted for 144 days. At the end of these 144 days, General Townshend had to surrender on 29 April 1916, seeing that there was not even a single piece of bread in his hand (Townshend 2007: 568-570).

The total number of people taken as war prisoners by the Turkish Delegation was 13309. Of these people, 1306 were either sick or wounded (General Staff 1979: 780). Among the frontiers that the Ottoman Army fought, the Iraq frontier was the one where highest number of allied soldiers was taken prisoner. It can be understood from the telegram sent on 29 April 1916 to the Ministry of the Interior by Brigadier General Halil Pasha, the Mayor of Baghdad and Second Commander of the Sixth Army, that 500 officers – five of whom were generals – and 13000 British soldiers were taken prisoner when Kut Al Amara was taken by the Turkish forces (Özçelik 2015: 11). According to Candler and Millar, following the signing of the Armistice of Mudros, 1306 of the 2680 officers and privates who were taken prisoner in Kut Al Amara and

1290 out of 10486 Indian soldiers died, and there was no trace from 449 British and 1773 Indian soldiers (Candler 1919: 228, Millar 1970: 284).

According to the Turkish press then, Townshend, who was an accomplished commander, waited for several months, because he hoped to be assisted by the reinforcements to arrive from the Persian Gulf or the Russian troops that might advance to Baghdad over Iran, although he knew very well that it was impossible for him and his troops to flee from Kut Al Amara (Özçelik 2015: 14). This wait cost a great deal both for himself and for the British Relieving Force.

Conclusion

The British forces tried real hard to defend Kut Al Amara. In the 144 days during which the siege was in progress, the British forces attempted for eleven break-out efforts. The first of these attempts was the Battle of Sheikh Said and the Battle of Vadiikelal followed it. Then came the First Battle of Hanna and after that the Battle of Dujaila. Then the Battle of Zemzir, Second Battle of Hanna, Third Battle of Hanna and Fourth Battle of Hanna followed. Finally, the capture of the cargo ship, Julnar, by Turks was their last sally attempt. As it is clearly seen above, none of these efforts was successful. In their efforts to save the Sixth Division, which was under siege in Kut Al Amara, the British Relieving Forcesuffered 21973 losses between 6 January and 22 April, twice as much the population of the Sixth Division.

When the numbers studied carefully, it can be seen that the difference between the number of people taken prisoner in the end and the number of soldiers who lost their lives to save the division in Kut Al Amara is nearly two fold. The British suffered 22000 losses in order to rescue 13309 people. Considering these numbers, it can be said that the British lost several times in Kut Al Amara. It can be seen that it was due to General Townshend's refraining from any sally attempt that they suffered so many losses in Kut Al Amara. If a sally could have been carried out in the early stages of the siege, they may not have suffered so many losses and the siege around them may not have been successful. In fact, General Townshend defended Kut Al Amara quite well, yet by not making a sally attempt, he prepared his own fate as well. However, the real reason why Townshend did not attempt for a sally operation was the well-organized siegcarried out by the Turkish forces. The Kut Al Amara defeat was of great importance for the pride of the British. After their defeat at Gallipoli, their reputation was badly shaken in the Middle East by the Kut Al Amara defeat. These two great victorious won by the Turkish forces prompted the British government to establish two commissions of inquiry to investigate Gallipoli and Kut Al Amara cases.

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