Before deconstructing the discursive imagery of modern Japan that proliferated in Ottoman Turkish and Arabic newspapers, journals, books, government documents, and other forms starting in the late nineteenth century, the Ottoman social and political milieu into which this discourse was introduced must be elucidated so that we can better understand the influence Japan’s achievements had upon peoples in the Empire, how such information flowed within Ottoman society, and the role of this discourse in affecting or legitimating change in the structure of the Ottoman polity. As mentioned previously, Ottoman societal organizing principles historically had been based around the sharp distinction made between the askeri or ruling elite, and the reaya, the Ottoman masses, on the one hand, and upon the categorization of communities as Muslim or non-Muslim, on the other. The Islamic Ottoman polity ultimately centered around the Sultan as protector of his subjects, with mediation between the masses and the Ottoman authorities by the religious classes. The arrival of ideas to the Empire from the European Enlightenment and the French Revolution profoundly disrupted this traditional class and communal system.

Multinational empires of the nineteenth century attempted to employ methods to hold themselves together while simultaneously being pulled apart by the centrifugal forces of the various ethno-linguistic and religious communities under their umbrellas who, tempted by nationalist ideologies, were beginning to aspire toward independent nationhood. In the Ottoman world, adhering to the fundamental principles of linear nationalist development while trying to preserve the heterogeneous character of the Empire resulted in an attempt by the Ottoman ruling elite to institute reforms and to promote a doctrine of “Ottomanism.” Ottomanism is defined as the prevalent ideology of liberal reformers in the late Ottoman period who argued the Ottoman Empire was still a viable Islamic political entity provided it guaranteed the rights of its citizens irrespective of religion or ethnicity, and in turn whose loyalty to the Ottoman homeland, or vatan, was considered a universal, patriotic duty. In effect, Ottomanism was a reworking of the Western nation-state conception to fit the needs of a multiethnic polity much broader and more
varied than most nations in Europe; it was an effort to make all citizens equal under the law and to satisfy those elements in its realm who were succumbing to more exclusive forms of national-communal identification (Ottoman Greeks for example).

The mid-nineteenth century Tanzimat reforms, which aimed at reorganizing the Ottoman administration and military, coincided with the creation of a new bureaucratic class whose interests at times deviated from those of the rest of society.3 The new elite, state-educated bureaucrats who desired to drag the Ottoman Empire and society into the modern world through implementation of reform from above, whether Islamic-minded or not, encountered resistance at times by other elements in the Empire. For example, the Young Ottoman approach to reaching modernity was one that sought to reconcile Western constitutional thought and a patriotic love of homeland with Islamic principles; they viewed the senior bureaucrat-reformers as too arbitrary, too Westernizing in their reform policies and not truly democratic in their decrees. Nonetheless, both the Tanzimat statesmen and the Young Ottomans would have a profound impact upon the ideological outlook of the Young Turk movement that eventually came to oppose Sultan Abdülmhamid II during his reign (r. 1876–1909).

The European advance, physically and intellectually, into Ottoman life, hastened the emergence of a political challenge to the Hamidian status quo in the Empire in the form of the Young Turk movement. As İslamoğlu-Inan describes,

Just as the society was “traditionalizing” to protect itself from the onslaught of the “Westernizing” Tanzimat state, under Abdülmhamid the state structure was “traditionalizing” to preserve itself in the face of European expansion. In the process, the state was becoming increasingly more rigid and oppressive inside the Empire. One explanation for this may be that Islamic ideology could not provide the ideological unity among different classes in a society the social-political cohesion of which was undermined through the integration of its principal classes (bureaucracy and merchants) into the European world system.4

The Islamic-based Ottoman unity that had prevailed among the various classes, ethnicities, and religious communities within the Empire in earlier centuries had begun to erode by the late nineteenth century as a consequence of global economic peripheralization and the influx of Western intellectual and organizational patterns. These new principles either came into conflict with old ones, or they impaired the ability of Islamic institutions to mediate between state and society so that a duality emerged between the modernizing elite and those desiring to preserve a more traditional way of life in the Empire.5

Ottoman intellectuals from bureaucratic, religious, and other classes newly created by the socioeconomic transformation such as journalists, publishers, teachers, political activists, and military officers observed this disruption of former Ottoman political unity. Many of these individuals, keenly aware both of this breakdown and of Western interference in the Empire, searched for ways to avoid its destruction. Former Islamic-Ottoman institutions seemed unable