A Difference Between Nationalist Terrorism and Religious Violence

Although the efforts of nationalist terrorism and religious violence may be directed towards the acquisition [attainment] of similar and even overlapping political goals, actors in either camp can be uniquely identified by the feasibility of their demands. Nationalist terrorists are decidedly more realistic, whereas extreme proponents of religious practitioners violence tend to pursue uncompromisingly idealistic dreams. Groups that fall between the two extremes, like Hezbollah, can exhibit traits of both types simultaneously or alternately depending on the circumstances, thus fulfilling the political goal criterion of terrorism. (Townshend, 104-105)

As purely nationalist groups, the IRA and ETA are exemplars of the traits that typify members of this category. While the terror campaigns of both have been long-lived affairs, the leaders of these groups recognize human conditions and operate on a human timescale. Although The IRA might articulate the desire for a singular state for all Irish, but it has been content at least temporarily with concessions that [add: gradually?] bring them closer to that vision. (Townshend, 80-82) The ETA represents the flip side where the utter futility of a Basque home state has become apparent to leaders at different points in the organization’s history, thus leading to dips in or even (the promise of) the cessation of terrorist activities. (Townshend, 86) What both cases suggest is that many nationalist terrorists are generally amicable to concept of reconfiguration and amenable to negotiation, even if it means alienating radical hardliners.

Moreover, nationalist demands can be moderate enough and presented in a way that governments may even find acceptable, as was the case with the FLN. (Townshend, 94) These are traits that nationalist terrorists do not share with their religiously motivated counterparts.

Groups like Aum Shinrikyo and Al-Qaeda are comparatively less pliable. Compromise is inconceivable, for falling short of their objectives, even with generous partial concessions.
represents a total failure. This is not to say that such groups are indefinitely perpetual, for they too can be vulnerable to dissipating enthuasms. However, the quality nature of the political goal, starkly different from nationalist aspirations because of the apolitical agenda, necessitates this zero-sum game for several reasons. Unlike nationalist terrorists, radical religious groups strive for intangible goals and are impelled by an intangible authority. Some ends may seem corporeal (e.g. the expulsion of a heretical population), but even then, the ultimate purpose is something ethereal like spiritual purity. (Townshend, 98) Thus, the aspirations of the religiously violent are often interpreted as fantastically expansive by secular societies that are simply incapable of initiating a dialogue on these terms, as they cannot comprehend the vocabulary. (Townshend, 100-101) In some cases, the religiously violent will not even entertain the notion of compromise because the outright goal is death. (Townshend 100)