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## Resonant x-ray scattering reveals possible disappearance of magnetic order under hydrostatic pressure in the Kitaev candidate $\gamma$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub>

Nicholas P. Breznay, Alejandro Ruiz, Alex Frano, Wenli Bi, Robert J. Birgeneau, Daniel Haskel, and James G. Analytis

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# Resonant x-ray scattering reveals possible disappearance of magnetic order under hydrostatic pressure in the Kitaev candidate $\gamma$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub>

Nicholas P. Breznay,<sup>1,2,\*</sup> Alejandro Ruiz,<sup>1,2</sup> Alex Frano,<sup>1,3</sup> Wenli Bi,<sup>4,5</sup>  
Robert J. Birgeneau,<sup>1</sup> Daniel Haskel,<sup>4</sup> and James G. Analytis<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Physics, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley CA 94720, USA*

<sup>2</sup>*Materials Science Division, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, Berkeley CA 94720, USA*

<sup>3</sup>*Advanced Light Source, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, Berkeley CA 94720, USA*

<sup>4</sup>*Advanced Photon Source, Argonne National Laboratory, Argonne, Illinois 60439, USA*

<sup>5</sup>*Department of Geology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana IL 61801, USA*

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Honeycomb iridates such as  $\gamma$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub> are argued to realize Kitaev spin-anisotropic magnetic exchange, along with Heisenberg and possibly other couplings. While systems with pure Kitaev interactions are candidates to realize a quantum spin liquid ground state, in  $\gamma$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub> it has been shown that the presence of competing magnetic interactions leads to an incommensurate spiral spin order at ambient pressure below 38 K. We study the pressure sensitivity of this magnetically ordered state in single crystals of  $\gamma$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub> using resonant x-ray scattering (RXS) under applied hydrostatic pressures of up to 3.0 GPa. RXS is a direct probe of electronic order, and we observe the abrupt disappearance of the  $\mathbf{q}_{\text{sp}}=(0.57, 0, 0)$  spiral order at a critical pressure  $P_c = 1.4$  GPa with no accompanying change in the symmetry of the lattice.

Honeycomb magnetic materials with strong spin-orbit coupling were recently proposed to realize spin-anisotropic “Kitaev” magnetic exchange<sup>1</sup> and therefore to host a highly entangled spin-liquid ground state with fractionalized excitations<sup>2,3</sup>. Additional interactions (such as Heisenberg or next-nearest-neighbor couplings) that compete with the Kitaev exchange can stabilize many possible spin orders<sup>4–8</sup>. For example, the layered compounds Na<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub> and RuCl<sub>3</sub>, composed of edge-sharing IrO<sub>6</sub> or RuCl<sub>6</sub> octahedra, show a zig-zag spin texture<sup>9–11</sup>. The three-dimensional (3D) harmonic honeycomb  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$  polytypes of Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub><sup>12,13</sup> both exhibit an incommensurate spiral order<sup>14,15</sup>. These magnetic ground states derive from the balance of Kitaev ( $K$ ), Heisenberg ( $J$ ), and other possible couplings between spins  $\vec{S}_i$  in the Hamiltonian

$$H = \sum_{\substack{i,j \\ \gamma \in x,y,z}} \left( K S_i^\gamma S_j^\gamma + J \vec{S}_i \cdot \vec{S}_j + \dots \right). \quad (1)$$

Here the  $\gamma = x, y, z$  Kitaev exchange directions couple spins that are perpendicular to the planes formed by adjacent edge-sharing IrO<sub>6</sub> octahedra, shown for  $\gamma$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub> in Fig. 1AB.

With such a delicately balanced Hamiltonian, minor changes in its parameters may result in a drastic alteration of the magnetic ground state. These changes may tune away from long-range magnetic order, and perhaps towards unexplored phases such as a quantum spin liquid. One experimental approach to achieving this goal is to apply an external perturbation and study the evolution of the magnetic ground state. For example, a magnetic field applied to  $\beta$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub> suppresses the spiral order and stabilizes a canted zig-zag spin texture, as observed by recent resonant x-ray scattering studies<sup>16</sup>.

Hydrostatic pressure can also be a useful control parameter. X-ray magnetic circular dichroism (XMCD)

experiments on  $\beta$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub> suggest the disappearance of the material’s ferromagnetic response in  $\mu_0 H = 4$  T near 2 GPa, which has been put forth as evidence of a new magnetic ground state<sup>13</sup>. However, the lack of momentum space ( $Q$ ) resolution of XMCD leaves open the question of which of the nearby magnetic phases responds to hydrostatic pressure. High-pressure setups pose broad experimental challenges for techniques (such as magnetic x-ray scattering) that track individual magnetic orders; to date there have been no such studies under pressure in the honeycomb iridates.

Recent developments in high brightness synchrotron x-ray sources have allowed for high pressure apparatus to be integrated in a resonant x-ray scattering (RXS) experiment. RXS directly probes electronic and magnetic orders resolved in  $Q$ -space by tuning the energy of incident x-rays to be on resonance with an element’s absorption edge. The resulting scattering process is sensitive to both charge and magnetic order of the valence electrons. At the Ir  $L_{2,3}$ -edge, for example, the intermediate states in the scattering process are sensitive to both the spin and orbital character of the 5d hole states<sup>17</sup>. RXS is particularly useful when neutron scattering is rendered unfeasible by small sample sizes or elements with large neutron absorption cross sections like iridium. Thus, the enhanced cross section at the Ir  $L_3$ -resonance along with the large Ewald sphere afforded by 11.215 keV x-rays have made RXS the best suited scattering technique to investigate the ambient pressure magnetic order in the honeycomb iridates  $\gamma$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub><sup>15</sup>,  $\beta$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub><sup>14</sup>, and Na<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub><sup>18</sup>. RXS studies under applied pressure, however, are strongly constrained by the apparatus geometry and resulting limitations on the sample dimensions and available reciprocal space. As a result, the precise influence of hydrostatic pressure on the ground state of Kitaev honeycomb iridates remains unknown.

In this work we use RXS to track the evolution of the

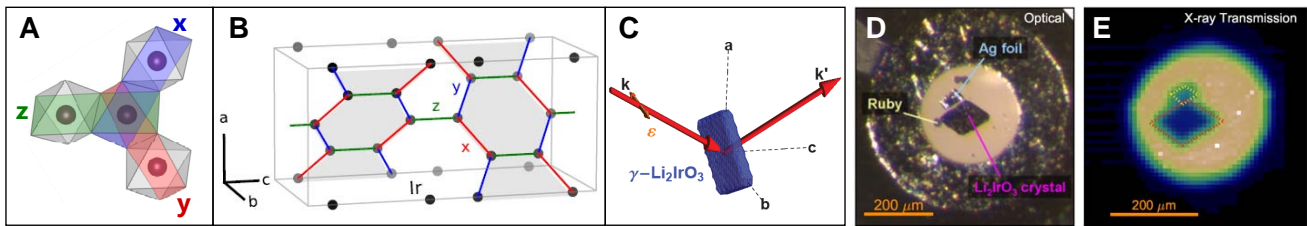


FIG. 1. (A) Local geometry of edge-sharing  $\text{IrO}_6$  octahedra, and (B) 3D network of Ir atoms composed of intersecting honeycomb layers (gray) in the orthorhombic crystal structure of  $\gamma\text{-Li}_2\text{IrO}_3$ ;  $x$ ,  $y$ ,  $z$  Kitaev bonds are highlighted in both panels. (C) Laue (transmission) scattering geometry; x-rays with initial wavevector  $\mathbf{k}$  and polarization  $\epsilon$  scatter into  $\mathbf{k}'$  within the  $\text{Li}_2\text{IrO}_3$  crystallographic  $a$ - $c$  plane. (D) Micrograph of the loaded diamond anvil cell with polished single crystal, and Ag foil and ruby spheres for pressure calibration and *in-situ* monitoring. (E) X-ray transmission image of the sample *in-situ*; both  $\gamma\text{-Li}_2\text{IrO}_3$  crystal and Ag foil are outlined.

$\gamma\text{-Li}_2\text{IrO}_3$  incommensurate spiral order with applied hydrostatic pressure, and observe the suppression of this magnetic phase. While we find no discontinuity in the lattice structure or an associated change in symmetry to the highest pressures measured, we observe an abrupt disappearance of the spiral Bragg peak at a critical pressure  $P_c = 1.4$  GPa. This disappearance signals the transition to a distinct electronic ground state.

We begin by reviewing the details of our experimental procedure before presenting the experimental results and analysis. Single crystals of  $\gamma\text{-Li}_2\text{IrO}_3$  were grown as described previously<sup>12,16</sup>. Fig. 1B shows the intersecting Ir honeycomb layers in one unit cell of the orthorhombic  $C_{ccm}$  crystal structure. To track the evolution of the spiral magnetic order in  $\gamma\text{-Li}_2\text{IrO}_3$ , RXS experiments were conducted using single crystals in a transmission (Laue) scattering geometry. Polished samples were 20-30  $\mu\text{m}$  thick, chosen to match the absorption length of x-rays near the Ir  $L_{2,3}$  edges of  $\approx 10$   $\mu\text{m}$ . The transmission scattering scheme is shown in Fig. 1C. Samples were pre-aligned for scattering within the crystal  $a$ - $c$  plane in a vertical geometry. The specular (H 0 0) direction was verified with several peaks, as described below. The polarization of the incoming x-rays was horizontal ( $\sigma$ ) with no polarization analysis of the scattered ( $\pi$ ) beam. The magnetic scattering intensity, proportional<sup>17</sup> to  $|\sum_i e^{i\mathbf{Q}\cdot\mathbf{r}_i} (\boldsymbol{\sigma} \times \boldsymbol{\pi}_{out}) \cdot \mathbf{m}_i|^2$ , where  $\mathbf{m}_i$  is the magnetic moment at site  $\mathbf{r}_i$ , projects the component of  $\mathbf{m}_i$  parallel to  $\mathbf{k}'$  (in the  $a$ - $c$  scattering plane).

X-ray scattering studies under pressure (up to 5 GPa) and at temperatures between 5-300 K were performed at beamline 4-ID-D of the Advanced Photon Source at Argonne National Lab. Merrill-Bassett type diamond anvil cells (DAC) with 800  $\mu\text{m}$  culets were used with stainless steel gaskets of 250 (150)  $\mu\text{m}$  initial (pre-indented) thicknesses, with 400  $\mu\text{m}$  sample chamber holes<sup>19</sup>. The gaskets were loaded with  $\gamma\text{-Li}_2\text{IrO}_3$  single crystals (cross-sectional area  $150 \times 100$   $\mu\text{m}^2$ ), along with several ruby balls and  $40 \times 40$   $\mu\text{m}^2$  pieces of 12  $\mu\text{m}$  thick Ag foil for ambient- and low-temperature pressure calibration<sup>20</sup>. The pressure medium was a 4:1 methanol:ethanol mixture. After preparing the DAC, the cell pressure at am-

bient temperature was monitored using a custom-built optical spectrometer and a Raman system to measure the ruby  $R1$  fluorescence peak. The target pressure on loading was  $\sim 0.1$  GPa. The pressure at low temperature was determined *in situ* using Ag powder peaks and the isothermal bulk modulus of Ag at 5 K ( $K_{\text{Ag}}=110.85$  GPa,  $K'_{\text{Ag}}=6.0$  GPa)<sup>20</sup>. We estimate a systematic uncertainty of  $\pm 0.1$  GPa in the pressures quoted below by comparing the estimated pressure from (1 1 1), (2 0 0), and (2 2 0) Ag powder peaks, and from repeated pressure measurements before and after scans.

All measurements reported were performed on two samples at the cryostat base temperature of  $4.7 \pm 0.5$  K. Pressure was changed *in situ* using a helium membrane. Cell layout and sample status were checked after loading (see optical image in Fig. 1D, showing diamond-shaped  $\gamma\text{-Li}_2\text{IrO}_3$  crystal, Ag foil, and ruby spheres in the DAC gasket hole) and monitored using both x-ray transmission maps (Fig. 1E, obtained using a slit-defined  $30 \times 30$   $\mu\text{m}^2$  beam). To track the absolute magnetic Bragg peak intensities with pressure, peak areas were normalized to the integrated (4 0 0) rocking curve intensities. The mosaic full-width at half-maximum values are  $0.05$ - $0.10^\circ$  for sample 1 between 0-3 GPa, and  $0.01^\circ$  for sample 2 at 2.0 GPa.

Based on the restricted scattering geometry imposed by the DAC, we focused our study on (H 0 0) peaks in reciprocal space. In  $\gamma\text{-Li}_2\text{IrO}_3$ , selection rules forbid the (1 0 0) and (3 0 0) lattice peaks, while the structure factor for the (2 0 0) order is strongly suppressed. Fig. 2A shows a reciprocal space map of the (H 0 0) axis, where an intense structural (4 0 0) Bragg peak and weaker (2 0 0) peak are both observed. (In the  $\beta\text{-Li}_2\text{IrO}_3$  polytype the (2 0 0) peak is forbidden.) Non-structural peaks located at  $(4 \pm 0.57, 0, 0)$  correspond to the incommensurate spiral magnetic order<sup>14,15</sup>, which at ambient pressure onsets at  $T_{\text{sp}} = 38$  K. The main finding of this work is the disappearance of this peak at  $P_c = 1.4$  GPa, shown in Fig. 2B at 4.7 K. The electronic nature of these peaks is confirmed by fixed- $Q$  energy scans (Fig. 2C) showing a strong enhancement of the diffracted intensity near the 11.215 keV Ir  $L_3$  resonance, in contrast to the weak back-

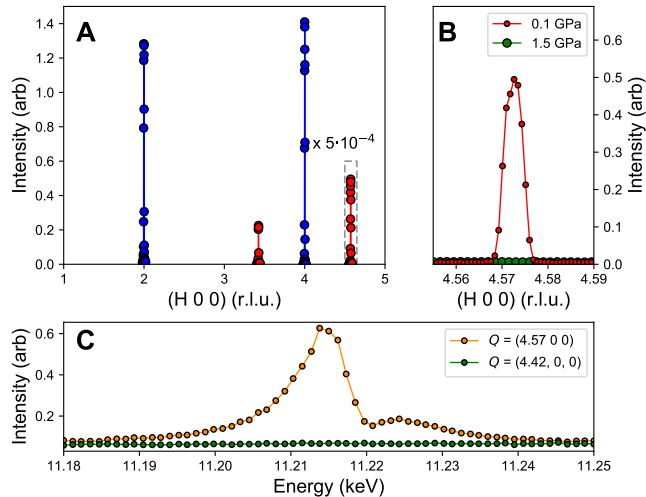


FIG. 2. (A) Magnetic (red) and structural (blue) Bragg peaks along the  $(H 0 0)$  direction measured at 4.7 K; the  $(4 0 0)$  peak has been scaled by a factor of  $5 \times 10^{-4}$ . (B) Zoom-in of the dashed region in (A) showing scans near  $(4 0 0) + \mathbf{q}_{\text{sp}} = (4.57 0 0)$ . The magnetic Bragg peak visible at 0.1 GPa (red) disappears abruptly above 1.4 GPa (green). (C) Energy scans at fixed  $\mathbf{Q} = (4.57 0 0)$  and away from the magnetic peak  $\mathbf{Q} = (4.42 0 0)$  showing a featureless background.

ground observed away from the spiral order peak at  $(4.42 0 0)$  that shows an increase of  $\sim 10\%$  above the Ir edge due to fluorescence.

Under applied hydrostatic pressure we observe continuous reduction in the unit cell volume with a large bulk modulus typical of iridates. Fig. 3A shows the pressure dependence of the  $(4 0 0)$  Bragg peak (normalized), as well as the spiral order peak (panel B). The curves are vertically offset for clarity, and labeled with the corresponding pressure; because of the fine incremental changes we quote the most precise estimate for each pressure, suppressing the  $\pm 0.1$  GPa systematic uncertainty. The shift in the 3.3 GPa  $(4 0 0)$  scan is a consequence of a large pressure increment; the  $a$ -axis lattice parameter evolves linearly with pressure over the entire range studied, shown in Fig. 3C. Also shown in Fig. 3C is a linear fit yielding  $da/dP = -0.015 \text{ \AA}/\text{GPa}$ . Assuming an isotropic fractional change in the unit cell dimensions, the  $T = 4.7$  K bulk modulus  $K_0 = -\frac{1}{3}a\left(\frac{da}{dP}\right)^{-1} = 130 \pm 20$  GPa. Electronic structure calculations for  $\beta\text{-Li}_2\text{IrO}_3$  indicate an anisotropic compressibility<sup>21</sup> with  $a$  more compressible than  $c$ . This would increase  $K_0$  relative to the above estimate and be quite comparable to the 150-250 GPa value of  $K_0$  observed recently in studies of  $\beta\text{-Li}_2\text{IrO}_3$  powders<sup>22</sup> as well as in other iridates<sup>23,24</sup>.

Neither the  $(4 0 0)$  Bragg peak amplitude nor width change appreciably with increasing pressure, indicating that the crystal quality remains constant. Aside from contraction of the unit cell (shown in Fig. 3C), no structural changes were observed; the symmetry of the lattice appears intact throughout this pressure range.

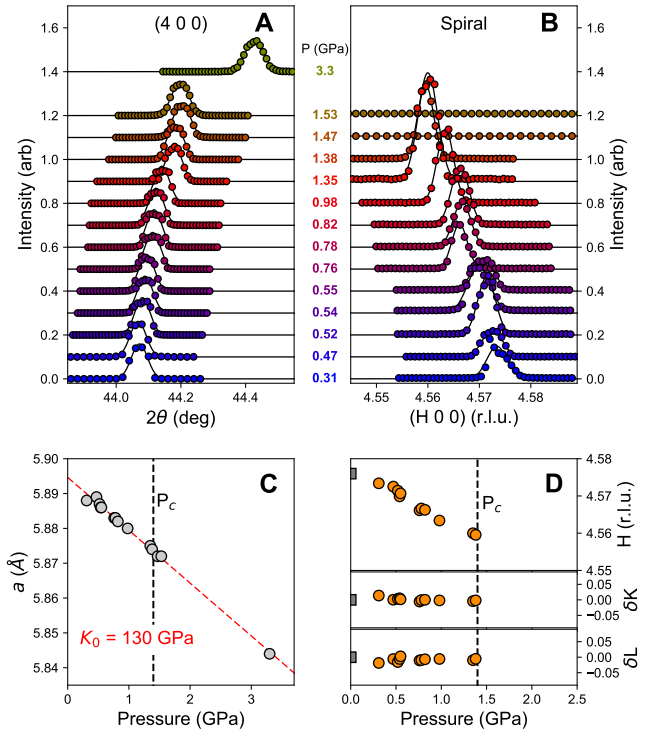


FIG. 3. Evolution under applied pressures from 0.3 to 3.0 GPa, as labeled, for (A) the  $(4 0 0)$  Bragg peak intensity versus  $2\theta$  and (B) the spiral order peak. Solid lines are guides to the eye. (C) Decrease in lattice constant  $a$  with applied hydrostatic pressure, extracted from the  $(4 0 0)$  structural Bragg peak; assuming a relative change in volume that is isotropic, the bulk modulus  $K = 130$  GPa. (D) Upper panel: Decrease in the spiral order wavevector  $\mathbf{q}_{\text{sp}}$  with applied pressure. The wavevector is not close to a commensurate value at  $P_c$ . Lower panels: dependence of the magnetic peak's component along  $(0 K 0)$  and  $(0 0 L)$ , relative to the position of the  $(4 0 0)$  Bragg reflection. The gray square points were obtained from companion experiments at ambient pressure.

Figure 3B shows the pressure evolution of the spiral order peak, tracking its position along the  $(H 0 0)$  axis as the pressure increases. The incommensurate wavevector  $\mathbf{q}_{\text{sp}}$ , normalized to the change in lattice constant, decreases with increasing pressure as shown in Fig. 3D (upper panel);  $\mathbf{q}_{\text{sp}}$  decreases by 0.3% before the spiral order disappears at  $P_c$ . The linear and continuous decrease observed in  $\mathbf{q}_{\text{sp}}$ , ending at an apparently irrational fraction, precludes an incommensurate-to-commensurate transition. Furthermore, we monitored the peak position along directions orthogonal to  $(H 0 0)$  by performing angular motions ( $\theta$ - and  $\chi$ -scans). The magnetic peak position does not shift with respect to the Bragg reflection  $(4 0 0)$  over the corresponding reciprocal space ranges shown in Fig. 3D (lower panels). As the peak width is also pressure independent, we conclude that  $\mathbf{q}_{\text{sp}}$  is not continuously developing a component along  $K$  or  $L$ . Above an applied pressure of  $P_c = 1.4$  GPa, the spiral order peak is abruptly extinguished, as shown in Fig. 3B. We

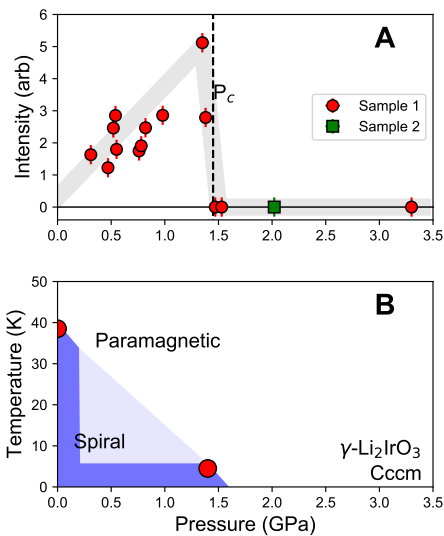


FIG. 4. (A) Magnetic Bragg peak intensity versus applied pressure for two samples; the intensity for sample 1 disappears abruptly at  $P_c=1.4$  GPa; no magnetic is observed at 2.0 GPa for sample 2. (B) Schematic pressure-temperature magnetic phase diagram for  $\gamma$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub>; the dark region indicates the extent of direct studies of the spiral-order phase to date. No discontinuous change in the lattice (space group *Cccm*) is observed to 3.0 GPa.

scanned the entire accessible range of  $2 < H < 6$  r.l.u. as well as within the orthogonal ranges of Fig. 3D (lower panels) and found no evidence for the incommensurate peaks anywhere in this reciprocal space volume.

To further consider the evolution of the spiral magnetic order, we integrate the  $\mathbf{q}_{sp}$  peak intensity as a function of applied pressure, as shown in Fig. 4A. To within the uncertainty associated with consistent re-alignment of the sample after changing pressure, the peak intensities gradually increase with pressure until abruptly disappearing at  $P_c$ . The otherwise identical sample 2 also showed no sign of the spiral order at 2.0 GPa, the only pressure studied. (The apparatus only allows the pressure to be *increased* after loading and cooling. For this sample, this initial pressure was 2.0 GPa.)

We present a schematic pressure-temperature phase diagram for  $\gamma$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub> in Fig. 4B; the dark region indicates the observed extent of the spiral magnetic order, and the shaded region represents the simplest associated phase boundary. Ongoing studies of this material indicate paramagnetic behavior with rapidly emerging magnetic anisotropy favoring the *b* (easy) axis direction<sup>12,25</sup> at ambient pressure. As  $T$  approaches 0 K,  $P_c$  likely continues to represent a sharp phase boundary between the spiral magnetic order and the as-yet undetermined high-pressure electronic phase; the sharp disappearance could signal a first-order quantum phase transition. As there is no change in the lattice symmetry, and no symmetry-breaking field being used to perturb the material, it is unclear what ordered state may exist beyond  $P_c$ , if any.

Under an applied magnetic field, a correlated paramagnet which admixes the broken symmetry of zig-zag order<sup>16,26</sup> appears to be the next competitive magnetic ground state at ambient pressure. However the transition observed under applied magnetic field appears to be continuous, in contrast to the pressure-tuned transition at  $P_c$ ; a different ground state may emerge in this case.

The effect of pressure on the crystal structure and associated Kitaev, Heisenberg, and other exchange couplings, was recently studied theoretically for  $\beta$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub><sup>21</sup>. In this closely related polytype, the Kitaev exchange coupling was predicted to decrease with increasing pressure above ambient, disappearing at 5-10 GPa. If a similar evolution of the magnetic interactions appears in  $\gamma$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub>, our results firmly demonstrate that the spiral magnetic order is stabilized by Kitaev exchange and is suppressed as this mechanism weakens. This could also answer why the intensity of the spiral order peak grows with pressure. For example, relieving the Kitaev frustration may allow a greater share of the  $J_{\text{eff}} = 1/2$  moment to appear in the incommensurate order before this state is suppressed at  $P_c$ . Finally, experimental studies of pressure evolution of the local Ir environment Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub> will also allow for a quantitative analysis of how the change in structure serves to push this material closer to or farther from the pure Kitaev limit.

The scale of  $P_c$  is modest compared to the 17 GPa required to suppress weak ferromagnetism in Sr<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>4</sub><sup>27</sup>. The pressure roughly corresponds to an energy density of 9 meV/Å<sup>3</sup>, or 0.08 eV/Ir; while less than both the spin-orbital energy  $\lambda_{\text{SO}} \sim 0.2 - 0.5$  eV as well as electronic interaction  $U \sim 0.5$  eV that have been reported in 5d iridate materials<sup>27-29</sup>, however it is beyond the  $\sim 1$  meV scale that was proposed to separate  $\beta$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub> from a 3D spin liquid state<sup>30</sup>. Mixing of the (nominally filled)  $J_{\text{eff}} = 3/2$  manifold of states could serve to disrupt the  $J_{\text{eff}} = 1/2$  doublet that stabilizes the unconventional magnetic orders in these materials. Such a picture could be investigated quantitatively with high-pressure studies of x-ray absorption (XAS) and XMCD spectroscopies that provide a quantitative probe of the spin and orbital components of the local magnetic moments.

In summary, we are able to observe the disappearance of the spiral magnetic order in  $\gamma$ -Li<sub>2</sub>IrO<sub>3</sub> at an applied pressure of 1.4 GPa by conducting resonant x-ray scattering studies at the Ir  $L_3$  edge. This observation provides strong evidence for tunability of the Kitaev, Heisenberg, and other magnetic exchange couplings with applied pressure. Future resonant diffraction studies will be able to incisively address the possibility of complete disappearance of long range magnetic order in the high pressure ground state of this Kitaev candidate material.

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- \* nbreznay@berkeley.edu
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