

# Bcl-2 Regulates HIF-1 $\alpha$ Protein Stabilization in Hypoxic Melanoma Cells via the Molecular Chaperone HSP90

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## Abstract

**Background:** Hypoxia-Inducible Factor 1 (HIF-1) is a transcription factor that is a critical mediator of the cellular response to hypoxia. Enhanced levels of HIF-1 $\alpha$ , the oxygen-regulated subunit of HIF-1, is often associated with increased tumour angiogenesis, metastasis, therapeutic resistance and poor prognosis. It is in this context that we previously demonstrated that under hypoxia, bcl-2 protein promotes HIF-1/Vascular Endothelial Growth Factor (VEGF)-mediated tumour angiogenesis.

**Methodology/Principal Findings:** By using human melanoma cell lines and their stable or transient derivative bcl-2 overexpressing cells, the current study identified HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein stabilization as a key regulator for the induction of HIF-1 by bcl-2 under hypoxia. We also demonstrated that bcl-2-induced accumulation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein during hypoxia was not due to an increased gene transcription or protein synthesis. In fact, it was related to a modulation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression at a post-translational level, indeed its degradation rate was faster in the control lines than in bcl-2 transfectants. The bcl-2-induced HIF-1 $\alpha$  stabilization in response to low oxygen tension conditions was achieved through the impairment of ubiquitin-dependent HIF-1 $\alpha$  degradation involving the molecular chaperone HSP90, but it was not dependent on the prolyl hydroxylation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein. We also showed that bcl-2, HIF-1 $\alpha$  and HSP90 proteins form a tri-complex that may contribute to enhancing the stability of the HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein in bcl-2 overexpressing clones under hypoxic conditions. Finally, by using genetic and pharmacological approaches we proved that HSP90 is involved in bcl-2-dependent stabilization of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein during hypoxia, and in particular the isoform HSP90 $\beta$  is the main player in this phenomenon.

**Conclusions/Significance:** We identified the stabilization of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein as a mechanism through which bcl-2 induces the activation of HIF-1 in hypoxic tumour cells involving the  $\beta$  isoform of molecular chaperone HSP90.

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## Introduction

The transcription factor Hypoxia-Inducible Factor 1 (HIF-1) regulates the expression of more than 70 genes involved in tumour angiogenesis, metabolic switch to anaerobic glycolysis, pro-survival, proliferative and apoptotic mechanisms [1]. Overall, the expression of HIF-1 target genes helps cells to adapt to, and thereby survive in, a stressful microenvironment. The activity of HIF-1 dimer, which is composed of  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  subunits, is modulated by the availability of the extremely labile oxygen-sensitive HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein subunit. HIF-1 activity depends on the inhibition of the post-transcriptional hydroxylation of the subunit  $\alpha$  by prolyl hydroxylases PHD1-3 and Factor Inhibiting HIF-1 (FIH-1). PHDs-mediated hydroxylation targets HIF-1 $\alpha$  for proteasomal degradation via the ubiquitination-dependent Von Hippel-Lindau (VHL) complex, while FIH-1-mediated hydroxylation leads to the inhibition of HIF-1 transactivation. The activity of PHD1-3 enzymes is dependent on substrates oxygen and 2-oxoglutarate, a Krebs cycle intermediate, and cofactor Fe<sup>2+</sup>; thus, under hypoxic

conditions, PHDs are less active due to the substrate-limiting conditions. The regulation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  stability by an oxygen-independent degradation pathway was also reported: the molecular chaperone Heat Shock Protein 90 (HSP90) binds and stabilizes HIF-1 $\alpha$ , competing with Receptor of Activated protein Kinase C (RACK1), which mediates prolyl hydroxylase/VHL-independent ubiquitination and proteasomal degradation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  [2]. Other post-translational modifications of HIF-1 $\alpha$ , such as acetylation, phosphorylation and nitrosylation, were also reported, despite contradictory results with regard to their effect on HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein stability and transcriptional activity [3–6]. Adding to the complexity of HIF-1 $\alpha$  regulation, it has recently been shown that the SUMOylation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  enables the hydroxylation-independent binding and subsequent degradation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  by the VHL-E3 ligase complex [7].

Although hypoxia is considered the main stimulus that drives HIF-1 function, a number of non-hypoxic stimuli allows the formation of an active HIF-1 complex in many types of human cancers. Effectors implicated in stimulating or suppressing an



immune response promote HIF-1 $\alpha$  transcription [8–10], whereas some autocrine growth factors enhance translation of the HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein [1]. Indeed, the loss of function of tumour suppressors and the gain of function of oncogenes also regulate different steps that lead to HIF-1 activation [1,11]. In this context we also found that overexpression of the anti-apoptotic and pro-survival protein bcl-2, in human melanoma and breast carcinoma cells, under hypoxia, enhances HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression and HIF-1 activity consequently leading to angiogenesis through vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) [12,13]. Moreover, the treatment of melanoma cells with a bcl-2/bcl-xL antisense oligonucleotide exerts antiangiogenic activity [14]. We also demonstrated that bcl-2 plays a role, in cooperation to hypoxia, in cell migration and invasion, contributing to tumour progression [15,16]. Indeed, a significant positive correlation between the expression levels of HIF-1 $\alpha$  and bcl-2 was found in neuroblastoma [17].

This study thoroughly investigated the mechanism by which bcl-2 regulates HIF-1 in tumour cells exposed to hypoxic conditions. It identified the stabilization of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein as a mechanism by which bcl-2 induces the activation of HIF-1 in hypoxic melanoma cells, through the impairment of ubiquitin-dependent HIF-1 $\alpha$  degradation with the involvement of the  $\beta$  isoform of the molecular chaperone HSP90.

## Results

### bcl-2 modulation regulates HIF-1 $\alpha$ protein expression in conditions strictly dependent on oxygen availability

We have previously reported that bcl-2 overexpression in human breast carcinoma and melanoma cell lines increases HIF-1 expression and activity and VEGF secretion under hypoxic conditions [12,13,18]. The ability of bcl-2 to modulate VEGF expression under hypoxia has been also extended to several other human melanoma cell lines (**Figure S1A,B**). The relevance of HIF-1 $\alpha$  as the main mediator of bcl-2 induced VEGF secretion under hypoxic conditions has been demonstrated using siRNA directed to HIF-1 $\alpha$  in M14 cells stably transfected with bcl-2 expression vector (**Figure S1C**). In fact, the down-regulation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein reduced VEGF expression both in control cells and bcl-2 overexpressing clones. Interestingly, after HIF-1 $\alpha$  reduction, VEGF levels secreted by bcl-2 transfectants were similar to those ones of control cells (**Figure S1D**). To evaluate whether down-regulation of bcl-2 shows opposite effect of bcl-2 overexpression in terms of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression, we silenced the endogenous expression of bcl-2 gene transfecting M14 cells with siRNA-targeting bcl-2 mRNA (si-bcl-2) and then exposing them to normoxia or hypoxia for 24 h. Western blot analysis demonstrated that the delivery of si-bcl-2 reduced expression of bcl-2 protein (**Figure 1A**) while, as expected, the transfection of a scrambled si-RNA (si-contr) did not have any effect on bcl-2 protein expression when compared to untransfected parental cell line (data not shown). Then, we evaluated the impact of reduced bcl-2 expression on HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression. As expected, HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein was undetectable in all cells under normoxic conditions, while an increased HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression was observed in the cells exposed to si-contr under hypoxia, but not in the cells after down-regulation of the bcl-2 protein expression (**Figure 1A**).

To further characterize the impact of bcl-2 on HIF-1 $\alpha$  expression, we evaluated whether bcl-2 overexpression was able to cooperate with other stimuli, beyond hypoxia, known to modulate HIF-1 $\alpha$  expression [1]. Firstly, we verified if increased cell density affected the level of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein in M14 cells stably transfected with empty vector (puro) and in their two derivative

stably bcl-2 overexpressing clones (Bcl2/5, Bcl2/37). As shown in **Figure 1B**, while HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein is detectable at same extent in all cell lines plated at low density (sparse), regardless of bcl-2 expression, an increased HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression was observed in bcl-2 transfectants, compared to the control line, either when they were plated at high density (dense) or when they reached high cell density (4 days of culture) and, as expected and previously reported [12,18], in hypoxic conditions. HIF-1 $\beta$  was constitutively expressed in the cells, and none of those stimuli modulated its expression. Nuclear translocation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  subunit is a necessary step for HIF-1 transcriptional activity through its association with HIF-1 $\beta$ , which is constitutively localized in the nucleus [1]. In our experimental model, high cell density conditions induced the nuclear expression of HIF-1 $\alpha$  in bcl-2 overexpressing clones while its expression was undetectable in control cells (**Figure S2A**). In parallel, control cells and bcl-2 overexpressing clones exhibited density-dependent induction of the HIF-1-dependent transcriptional activity under normoxic conditions of about 2.3 fold ( $p = 0.039$ ) while HRE-dependent transcriptional activity was not found to be significantly changed in control cells ( $p = 0.49$ ) (**Figure S2B**).

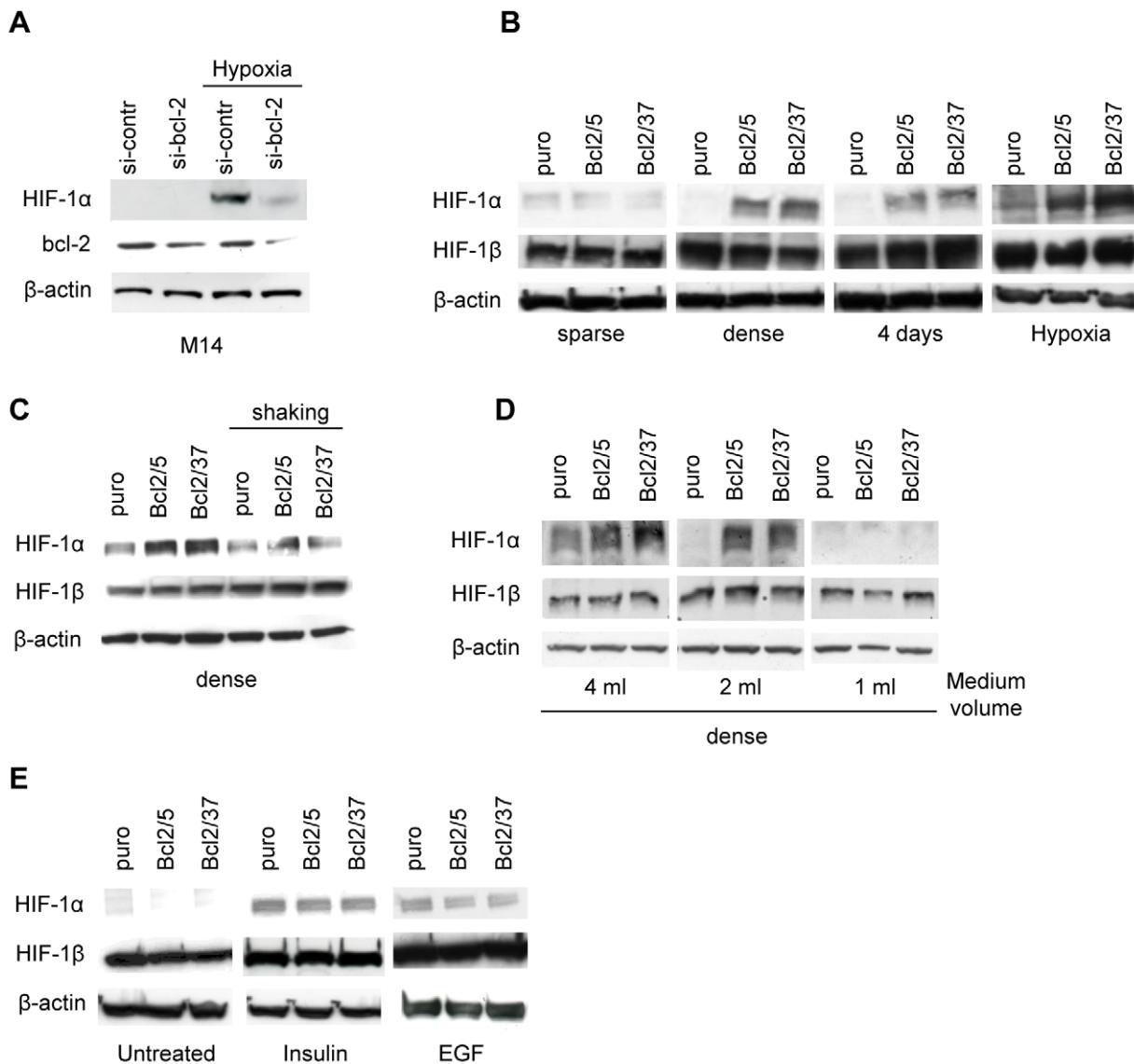
To further investigate the induction of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein observed in bcl-2 transfectants under high cell density conditions, we evaluated whether the creation of a local hypoxic microenvironment could be responsible for HIF-1 $\alpha$  induction. Hence, the cells were cultured at high density and gently shaken to disrupt any potential oxygen gradient due to the inter-cellular environment and to ensure a homogenous oxygen concentration within the cell culture medium. As depicted in **Figure 1C**, the gentle shaking drastically reduced the high density-dependent HIF-1 $\alpha$  induction in bcl-2 transfectants, thus indicating that oxygen pericellular gradient is an important factor contributing in the increase of HIF-1 $\alpha$  expression by bcl-2 in high cell density conditions. To confirm these results, we plated cells in high density conditions with decreasing volumes of medium, to enhance the oxygen exchange rate. As shown in **Figure 1D**, the decrease of culture medium volume from 4 to 1 ml determined a medium volume-dependent reduction of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression in both bcl-2 transfectants.

Next, we evaluated whether any differences existed between control cells and bcl-2 overexpressing clones in terms of HIF-1 $\alpha$  induction in response to growth-factor stimulation, another condition that induces hypoxia-independent HIF-1 $\alpha$  expression even in normoxia [19]. As shown in **Figure 1E**, both insulin and the Epidermal Growth Factor (EGF) induced HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression in all the cells under normoxia but more importantly no difference in the levels of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein was observed in bcl-2 transfectants compared to control cells.

### bcl-2 promotes HIF-1 $\alpha$ protein stability preventing its ubiquitin-mediated degradation

Since bcl-2 overexpression in melanoma cells under hypoxia did not alter HIF-1 $\alpha$  mRNA levels [12], we investigated the impact of bcl-2 overexpression on HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein stabilization under hypoxia. Firstly, we performed time course experiments to study the kinetics of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein induction in control cells and bcl-2 overexpressing clones. As shown in **Figure 2A** (left and right panels), exposure of cells to hypoxia determined a HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein induction, at a greater extent in bcl-2 transfectants compared to control cells, as previously reported. In particular, HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein level reached the maximum value at 24 h of hypoxia in all cell lines, but it decreased at later time point of 48 h, slower in bcl-2 overexpressing clones than in control cells.

To verify whether bcl-2 enhances HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression by affecting its translational rate, we determined the possible

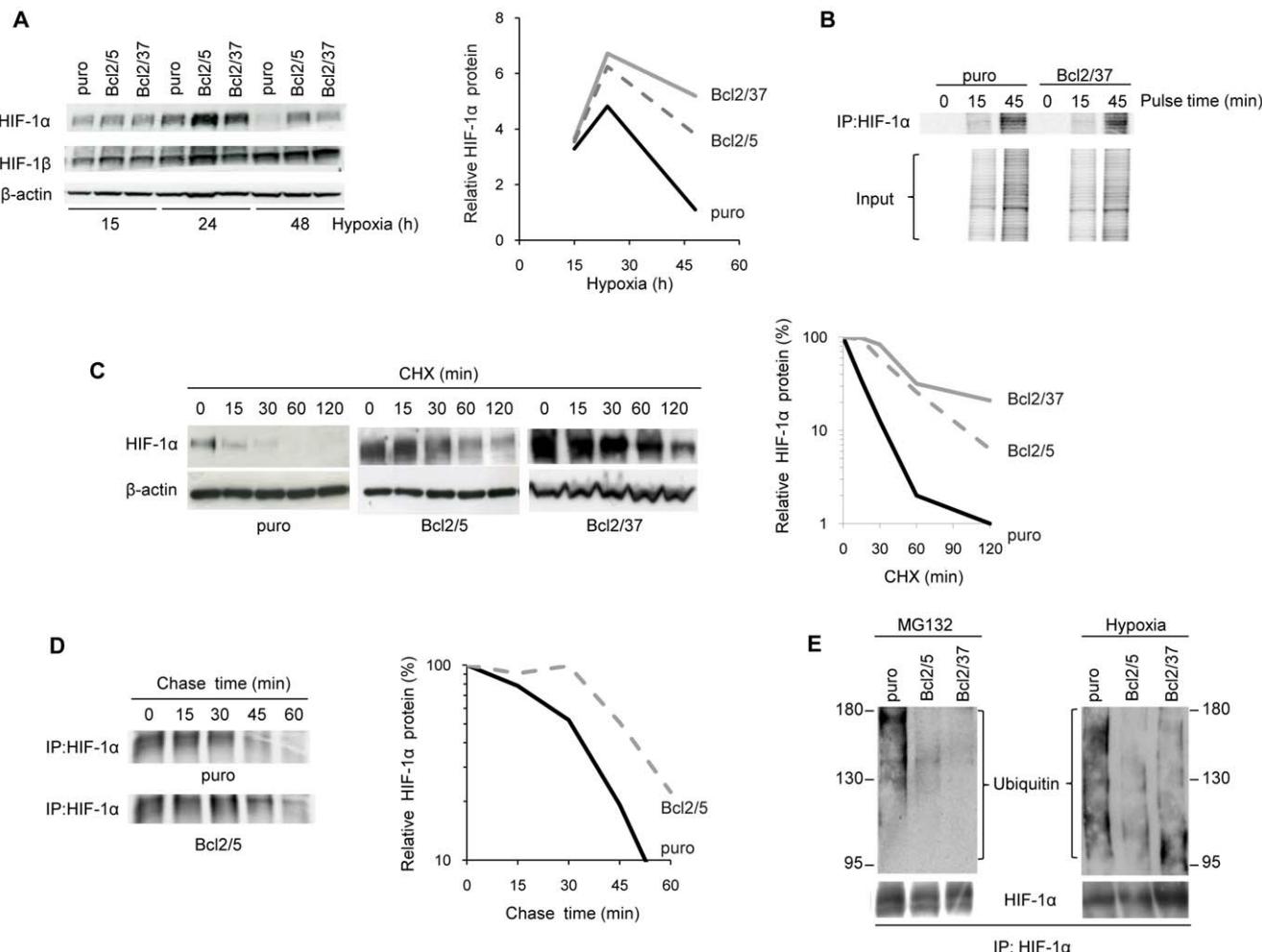


**Figure 1. bcl-2 modulation regulates HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression in conditions strictly dependent on oxygen availability.** (A) Western blot analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$  and bcl-2 protein expression in total extracts of M14 cells transfected with siRNA targeting bcl-2 mRNA (si-bcl-2) or with a control scrambled si-RNA (si-contr) and then exposed to normoxia or hypoxia for 24 h. (B) Western blot analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$  and HIF-1 $\beta$  protein expression in total extracts of M14 control (puro) and bcl-2 stably overexpressing (Bcl2/5, Bcl2/37) cells plated under low (sparse) or high (dense) cell density conditions, or cultured under normoxia for 4 days or under hypoxia for 24 h. Western blot analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$  and HIF-1 $\beta$  protein expression in total extracts of the cells plated under high cell density conditions and (C) exposed to 24 h shaking or (D) cultured with different volumes of medium. (E) Western blot analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$  and HIF-1 $\beta$  protein expression in total extracts of cells exposed to Insulin (100 nM) or Epidermal Growth Factor (EGF, 20 ng/ml) for 24 h. (A–E)  $\beta$ -actin protein amounts are used to check equal loading and transfer of proteins. Western blot analyses representative of two independent experiments with similar results are shown.

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involvement of bcl-2 in the regulation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein synthesis using [ $^{35}$ S]-labeled methionine and cysteine in pulse analysis. As shown in **Figure 2B**, HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein synthesis rate was almost identical in control cells and bcl-2 overexpressing clones, indicating that bcl-2 does not affect HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein synthesis. Therefore, the potential role of bcl-2 in the regulation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein turnover was analyzed. As depicted in **Figure 2C** (left and right panels), a time-dependent decrease of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein level was observed after treatment with the protein synthesis inhibitor Cyclohexamide (CHX) following hypoxia exposure, both in control cells and bcl-2 transfectants. Particularly under CHX exposure for 60 min, the HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein was still well detectable in bcl-2 transfectants while

weakly in the control cells. Indeed, bcl-2 overexpression increased the HIF-1 $\alpha$  half-life from  $15 \pm 5$  min to  $45 \pm 5$  min under hypoxic conditions (**Figure 2C**). Similar results were obtained evaluating the effect of bcl-2 on HIF-1 $\alpha$  half-life in high cell density conditions, where the HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein half-life was about  $20 \pm 10$  min in control cells, and increased to  $40 \pm 5$  min in bcl-2 transfectants (**Figure S3**). We confirmed these results performing pulse-chase experiment, in which a pulse with [ $^{35}$ S]-labeled methionine and cysteine was followed by a chase time of varying length (ranging from 15 to 60 min). As shown in **Figure 2D**, HIF-1 $\alpha$  degradation rate was higher in control cells compared to bcl-2 transfectants, in fact after 45 min of chase, the HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein was still well detectable in bcl-2



**Figure 2. bcl-2 promotes HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein stability preventing its ubiquitin-mediated degradation.** (A) Western blot analysis (left panel) and quantification (right panel) of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression in M14 control (puro) and bcl-2 stably overexpressing (Bcl2/5, Bcl2/37) clones exposed to hypoxia for the indicated time. (B) Pulse analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein synthesis rate in cells exposed to [ $^{35}$ S]-labeled methionine and cysteine for the indicated time. (C) Western blot analysis (left panel) and quantification (right panel) of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression in cells exposed to hypoxia for 24 h and then treated with Cyclohexamide (CHX, 50  $\mu$ g/ml) for the indicated time. (D) Pulse-chase analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein (left panel) and quantification (right panel) in cells plated under dense conditions, pulsed for 45 min with [ $^{35}$ S]-labeled methionine and cysteine and chased for the indicated time. (E) Whole cell lysates were immunoprecipitated (IP) with anti-HIF-1 $\alpha$  antibody and subjected to SDS-PAGE. (F) Western blot analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$  ubiquitination in the cells exposed to MG132 (10  $\mu$ M, 6 h) or to hypoxia for 24 h. Whole cell lysates were immunoprecipitated (IP) with anti-HIF-1 $\alpha$  antibody and then the Western blot analysis was performed using anti-Ubiquitin antibody. (A,C,D)  $\beta$ -actin protein amounts are used to check equal loading and transfer of proteins and to quantify relative HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein levels. (A–E) Western blot, pulse and pulse-chase analyses representative of two independent experiments with similar results are shown. (A,C,D) Densitometric analysis (right panel) of the relative Western blot or Pulse-chase analysis (left panel) was performed using Molecular Analyst Software and normalized with relative controls.

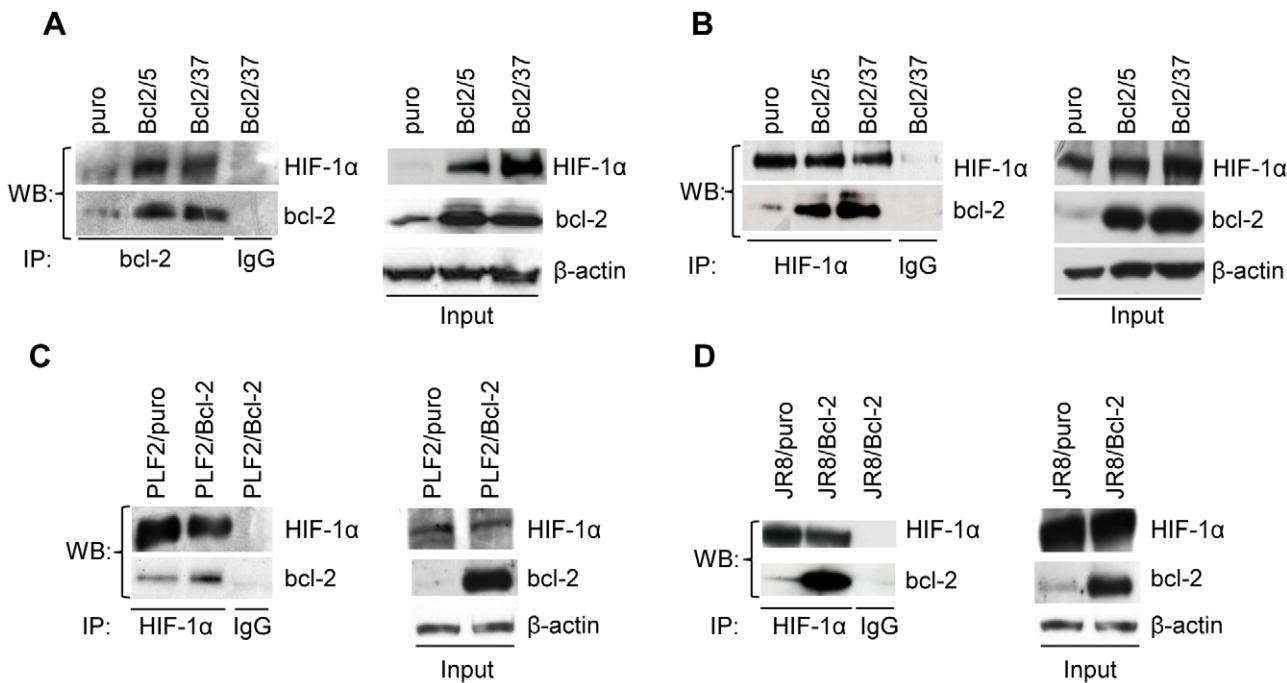
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transfectants, but not in the control cells. Next, we tested by immunoprecipitation experiments whether the effect of bcl-2 on HIF-1 $\alpha$  stabilization is due to an impairment of HIF-1 $\alpha$  ubiquitination. As shown in **Figure 2E**, higher levels of ubiquitinated HIF-1 $\alpha$  were found in control cells either treated with the proteasome inhibitor MG132 under normoxia, either exposed to hypoxia, when compared to levels of ubiquitinated HIF-1 $\alpha$  found in bcl-2 transfectants exposed to the same conditions. Taken together, all these data demonstrate that under hypoxia bcl-2 overexpression modulates HIF-1 $\alpha$  expression at a post-translational level through the stabilization of the HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein.

#### bcl-2 protein interacts with HIF-1 $\alpha$ protein

To test whether the effect of bcl-2 on the stability of HIF-1 $\alpha$  is due to their functional cooperation, we tested the eventual

interaction between bcl-2 and HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein by immunoprecipitation experiments. When immunoprecipitation was carried out using an antibody against bcl-2 protein and Western blot analysis was performed using antibodies that specifically recognizing HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein, bcl-2 was found to be immunoprecipitated with HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein in control cells and bcl-2 overexpressing clones after exposure to hypoxia, even though the bcl-2/HIF-1 $\alpha$  immunocomplex was more evident in bcl-2 transfectants when compared to control cells (**Figure 3A**). To confirm the interaction between endogenous HIF-1 $\alpha$  and bcl-2, the cells were treated with MG132 to accumulate similar levels of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein in all the cells, then immunoprecipitation experiments were performed using an anti-HIF-1 $\alpha$  antibody and the bcl-2/HIF-1 $\alpha$  immunocomplex were analyzed by Western blot using an anti-bcl-2 antibody (**Figure 3B**). Under these conditions, in spite of similar levels of



**Figure 3. bcl-2 interacts with HIF-1 $\alpha$ .** (A) Analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$ /bcl-2 protein interaction in M14 control (puro) and stably bcl-2 overexpressing (Bcl2/5, Bcl2/37) clones exposed to hypoxia for 24 h. Whole cell lysates were immunoprecipitated (IP) with anti-bcl-2 or control (IgG) antibodies and then the Western blot analysis was performed using anti-HIF-1 $\alpha$  and anti-bcl-2 antibodies. Analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$ /bcl-2 protein interaction in (B) M14 control (puro) and stably bcl-2 overexpressing (Bcl2/5, Bcl2/37) clones or (C,D) in PLF2 and JR8 control cells (PLF2/puro, JR8/puro) and stably bcl-2 overexpressing (PLF2/Bcl-2, JR8/Bcl-2) cells, exposed to MG132 (10  $\mu$ M, 6 h). Whole cell lysates were immunoprecipitated with anti-HIF-1 $\alpha$  or control (IgG) antibodies and then the Western blot analysis was performed using anti-HIF-1 $\alpha$  and anti-bcl-2 antibodies. (A–D)  $\beta$ -actin protein amounts are used to check equal loading and transfer of proteins. Western blot analyses representative of two independent experiments with similar results are shown.

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immunoprecipitated HIF-1 $\alpha$ , bcl-2 protein was well detectable within the immunoprecipitates in bcl-2 transfectants but only weakly in control cells, suggesting that HIF-1 $\alpha$  interaction with bcl-2 protein was stronger in bcl-2 overexpressing clones. Similar results were obtained when immunoprecipitations were performed using different antibodies recognizing different epitopes on the bcl-2 and HIF-1 $\alpha$  proteins (data not shown). Immunoprecipitation experiments of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein were also performed in two other melanoma cell lines, JR8 and PLF2, and their bcl-2 derivative stably clones treated with MG132 obtaining similar results (**Figure 3C,D**) and thus generalizing the ability of bcl-2 protein to interact with HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein.

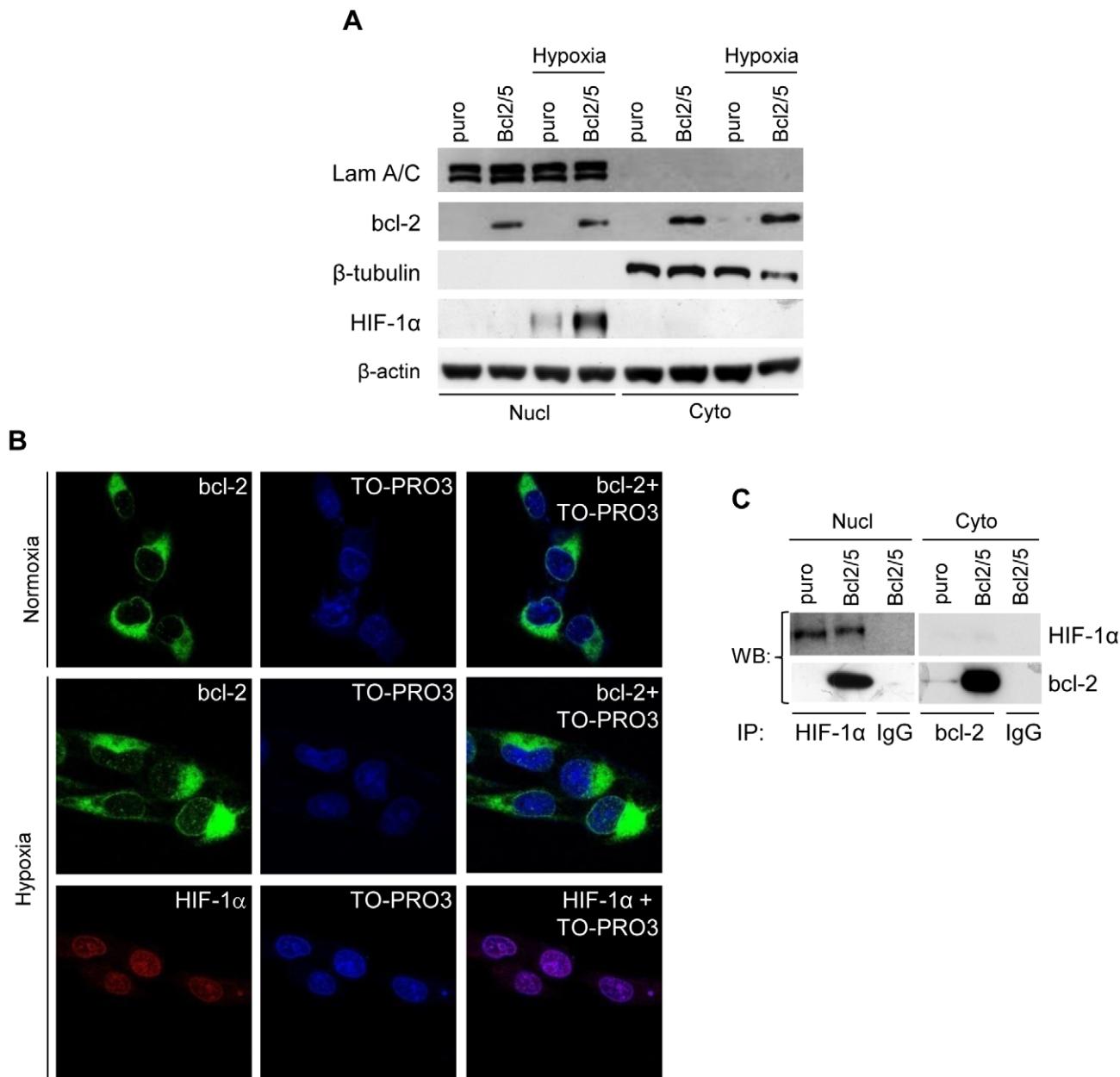
#### bcl-2 protein interacts with HIF-1 $\alpha$ protein in the nucleoplasm

bcl-2 is primarily localized in the outer mitochondrial membrane with minor expression in the nucleus and in the endoplasmic reticulum [20]. Recent reports indicate that bcl-2 also resides in the nuclear membrane and may even function within the nucleus [21–24]. On the other hand, HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein induced by hypoxic conditions mainly localizes and elicits its transcriptional activity in the nucleus [1]. Given that bcl-2 is able to interact with HIF-1 $\alpha$ , we examined the effect of hypoxia on the intracellular localization of HIF-1 $\alpha$  and bcl-2 by using biochemical fractionation and confocal microscopy. As reported in **Figure 4A**, hypoxic conditions induced HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein translocation in the nuclear fraction of both control cells and bcl-2 transfectants, even though HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression was higher in bcl-2 transfectants. By contrast, overexpressed bcl-2 protein was expressed in

nuclear and mainly in cytoplasmic compartments, and hypoxia did not modulate both bcl-2 expression or its cellular localization. Confocal microscopy (**Figure 4B**) confirmed that bcl-2 protein is mainly cytoplasmic but it is also localized in the nuclear envelope, and hypoxia does not modify bcl-2 localization. As expected, HIF-1 $\alpha$  is mainly localized into the nucleus, it was found to be organized in spots which co-localized with chromatin, correlated to an enhanced transcriptional activity of HIF-1 $\alpha$  under hypoxia. Given that hypoxia-induced HIF-1 $\alpha$  is mainly localized in the nuclear compartment, we formulated the hypothesis that bcl-2 may regulate HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein stability through the formation of a protein complex localized in the nucleus. Immunoprecipitation experiments on isolated nuclear protein extracts showed that bcl-2 was associated with HIF-1 $\alpha$ , while undetectable levels of HIF-1 $\alpha$ /bcl-2 complexes were observed in the cytosolic fraction, indicating that under hypoxia HIF-1 $\alpha$ /bcl-2 interaction may only occur in the nucleus (**Figure 4C**). Thus, the finding of an interaction between HIF-1 $\alpha$ /bcl-2 proteins in the nucleus suggests that bcl-2 may act on the stabilization of HIF-1 $\alpha$  in this cellular compartment.

#### bcl-2 regulates HIF-1 $\alpha$ protein stability in a prolyl hydroxylation-independent manner

Under normoxia, the proline to alanine mutation of residues 402 and 564 of human HIF-1 $\alpha$  makes the protein resistant to PHD-dependent hydroxylation and subsequent VHL-dependent ubiquitination and degradation [25]. Besides, PHD2 can be active in the degradation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  even under hypoxic conditions [26,27]. In order to study the impact of bcl-2 on PHD-mediated

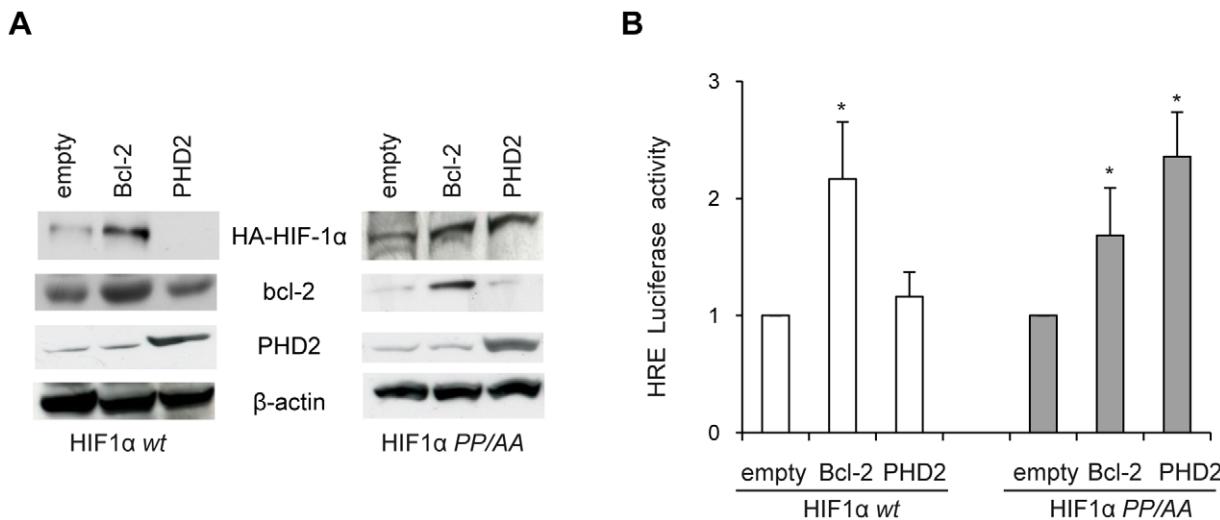


**Figure 4. bcl-2 interacts with HIF-1 $\alpha$  in the nucleus.** (A) Western blot analysis of bcl-2 and HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression in nuclear (Nucl) and cytoplasmic (Cyto) protein extracts of M14 control (puro) and bcl-2 stably overexpressing (Bcl2/5) clones exposed to hypoxia or to normoxia for 24 h. LaminA/C (Lam A/C) and  $\beta$ -tubulin were used as markers for nuclear and cytoplasmic fraction, respectively.  $\beta$ -actin protein amounts are used to check equal loading and transfer of proteins. (B) Confocal laser scanning microscopy of immunofluorescence staining performed on Bcl2/5 stably overexpressing clone exposed to hypoxia or to normoxia for 24 h. Fixed cells were labelled with anti-bcl-2 (green) or anti-HIF-1 $\alpha$  (red) antibodies. Nuclei were visualized using TO-PRO3® staining (blue). (C) Analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$ /bcl-2 interaction in Bcl2/5 stably overexpressing clone exposed to hypoxia for 24 h. Nuclear (Nucl) and cytoplasmic (Cyto) protein extracts were immunoprecipitated (IP) with anti-HIF-1 $\alpha$  or anti-bcl-2, respectively, or control antibody (IgG) and then the Western blot analysis was performed using anti-bcl-2 or anti-HIF-1 $\alpha$  antibodies. (A–C) Western blot and confocal analyses representative of two independent experiments with similar results are shown.

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degradation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein, we generated M14 cell line stably expressing *wild type* form of HIF-1 $\alpha$  (HIF-1 $\alpha$  *wt*) or hydroxylation-resistant (P402A/P564A) form of HIF-1 $\alpha$  (HIF-1 $\alpha$  *PP/AA*). These cells were then transiently transfected with an empty vector or with a vector encoding bcl-2 protein and HIF-1 $\alpha$  expression and transcriptional activity were analyzed under hypoxic conditions. As depicted in **Figure 5**, bcl-2 overexpression significantly increased the levels of both exogenous *wt* and hydroxylation-

resistant form of HIF-1 $\alpha$  (**Figure 5A**) and it also enhanced HRE-dependent transcriptional activity (**Figure 5B**). As expected, PHD2 overexpression inhibited the expression of HIF-1 $\alpha$  *wt* and HRE-dependent transcriptional activity while it did not abrogate the expression and activation of reporter gene transcription in cells expressing HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein containing the proline-to-alanine substitutions (**Figure 5B**). The discovery that bcl-2 had similar effects on the *wt* and mutant form of HIF-1 $\alpha$  indicated that bcl-2



**Figure 5. HIF-1 $\alpha$  prolyl hydroxylation is not required for bcl-2-induced increase of HIF-1 $\alpha$  expression and HIF-1 activity in hypoxia.** (A) Western blot analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$ , bcl-2 and PHD2 protein expression and (B) HRE-dependent transcriptional activity in M14 cells stably expressing HA-HIF-1 $\alpha$  wild-type (HIF1 $\alpha$  wt) or mutated (HIF1 $\alpha$  PP/AA), after transiently transfection with control vector (empty), bcl-2 or PHD2 expressing vectors, and then exposure to hypoxia for 24 h. (A)  $\beta$ -actin protein amounts are used to check equal loading and transfer of proteins. Western blot analyses representative of two independent experiments with similar results are shown. (B) Relative luciferase activity of each sample were normalized to the control vector transfected cells. Results represent the mean  $\pm$  SD of 3 independent experiments performed in triplicate, \*  $p \leq 0.01$ .

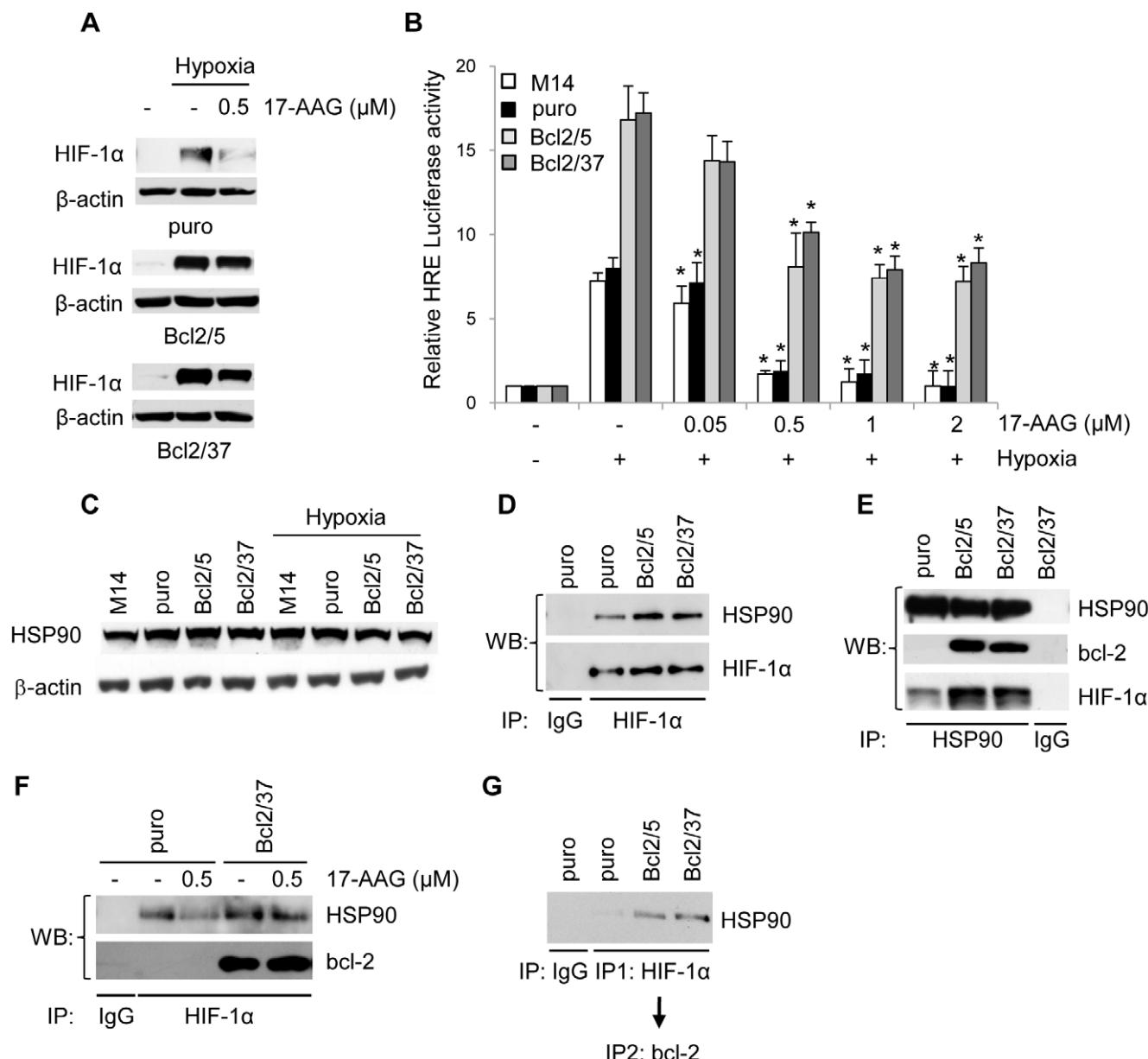
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regulates HIF-1 $\alpha$  expression independently from prolyl hydroxylation of HIF-1 $\alpha$ . These results are also supported by the findings that forced expression of bcl-2 had no impact on HIF-1 $\alpha$  stabilization when cells were treated with PHD inhibitors Cobalt Chloride and Desferoxamine, two iron antagonists known to inhibit hydroxylase activity (Figure S4).

#### bcl-2 forms a complex with HSP90 and HIF-1 $\alpha$ proteins, enhancing their interaction and protecting HIF-1 $\alpha$ from degradation mediated by 17-AAG

HSP90 is a molecular chaperone required for the stability and function of a number of proteins implicated in cancer cell growth and angiogenesis, including HIF-1 $\alpha$  [28]. In particular, it binds and stabilizes HIF-1 $\alpha$ , and it represents a critical factor in an O<sub>2</sub>/PHD/VHL-independent degradation pathway of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein [2]. To evaluate a possible contribution of HSP90 to bcl-2-induced stabilization of HIF-1 $\alpha$ , we determined whether the pharmacological inhibition of HSP90 with 17-AAG, an inhibitor that can alter the interaction of HSP90 with its clients [29], modulates HIF-1 $\alpha$  expression (Figure 6A) and transcriptional activity (Figure 6B) in control cells and two bcl-2 transfectants cells under hypoxia. 17-AAG reduced hypoxia-induced HIF-1 $\alpha$  accumulation in control cells, while only a very barely down-regulation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression was evident in bcl-2 overexpressing clones after 17-AAG treatment (Figure 6A). These results suggested that bcl-2 overexpression might confer a resistance of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein from the degradation induced by the 17-AAG. On the functional level, 0.05  $\mu$ M 17-AAG induced about 30% versus 10% inhibition of HRE-dependent transcriptional activity in control cells compared with bcl-2 transfectants. The higher dose of 2  $\mu$ M completely inhibited HRE-dependent transcriptional activity in control cells, by contrast bcl-2 transfectants cells were resistant to HRE-dependent transcriptional activity inhibition induced by the same dose of 17-AAG (Figure 6B). Most importantly, as shown in Figure 6C, HSP90 protein is highly expressed in both control and bcl-2 overexpressing cells, and the impact of either bcl-2 status and either hypoxic conditions on HSP90 protein expression was not relevant.

To provide evidence that the HSP90 is involved in bcl-2-induced stabilization of HIF-1 $\alpha$ , we investigated the effect of bcl-2 on the interaction between HIF-1 $\alpha$  and HSP90 proteins by immunoprecipitation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  and Western blot analysis of HSP90 protein. As depicted in Figure 6D, bcl-2 overexpression under hypoxia enhanced the ability of HIF-1 $\alpha$  to form a complex with HSP90. To confirm the interaction between HIF-1 $\alpha$  and HSP90 proteins, we performed a reverse immunoprecipitation experiment from total extract of hypoxic cells. Under these conditions, in spite of similar levels of immunoprecipitated HSP90, a larger amount of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein within the immunoprecipitate was found in total extracts of bcl-2 transfectants (Figure 6E), confirming a stronger interaction between HIF-1 $\alpha$  and HSP90 proteins in bcl-2 transfectants. We also studied the interaction between HSP90 and bcl-2 protein under hypoxic conditions and we found that HSP90 was associated with ectopic bcl-2 protein (Figure 6E). Similar results were also observed when immunoprecipitation experiments were carried out in nuclear extracts (data not shown). These findings suggest that bcl-2 may promote stabilization of HIF-1 $\alpha$  by increasing its ability to interact with the HSP90 chaperone complex. To gain insight to these results, we investigated whether the bcl-2/HSP90/HIF-1 $\alpha$  binding could be reversed when exposing the cells to 17-AAG. We found that 17-AAG treatment reduced the binding between HSP90 and HIF-1 $\alpha$  only in control cells and weakly in bcl-2 transfectants, confirming that bcl-2 overexpressing cells were more resistant to 17-AAG-induced degradation of HIF-1 $\alpha$ . Moreover, we found that the interaction of bcl-2 protein with HIF-1 $\alpha$  was not affected by 17-AAG treatment (Figure 6F). Because our results showed that both HSP90 and HIF-1 $\alpha$  proteins bind to bcl-2, we investigated the potential formation of a HSP90/HIF-1 $\alpha$ /bcl-2 tri-complex. To address this hypothesis, the cell lysates were firstly immunoprecipitated with anti-HIF-1 $\alpha$  antibody, then subjected to a second immunoprecipitation with anti-bcl-2 antibody, and the immuno-complexes were analyzed by Western blot analysis using antibody against HSP90 protein. As shown in Figure 6G, HSP90 could be found in complex with HIF-1 $\alpha$  and bcl-2 protein in cells overexpressing bcl-2, demonstrating the formation of a HSP90/



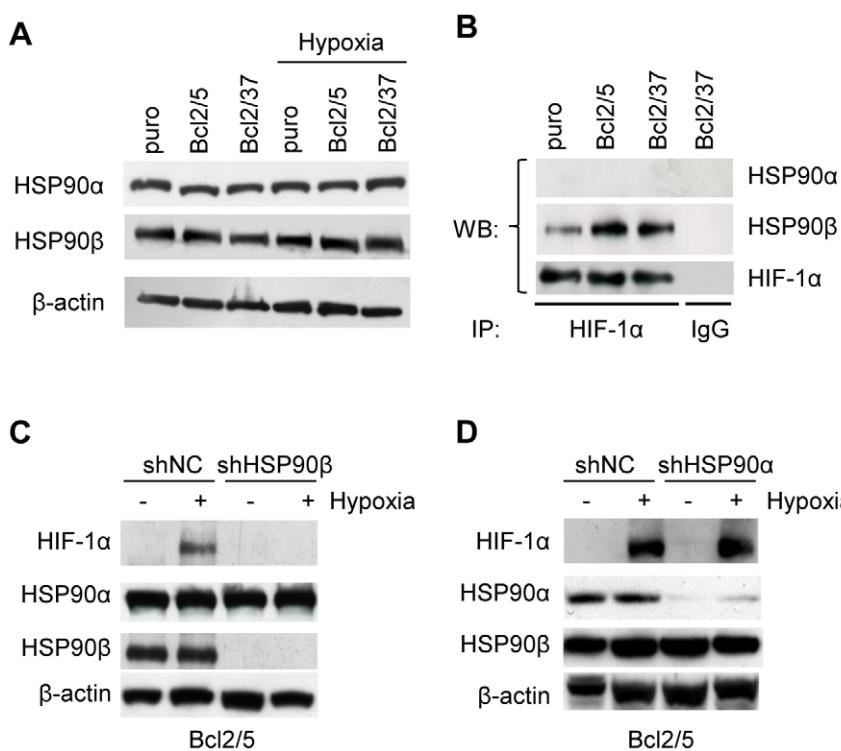
[28]. Experiments were performed to evaluate the impact of bcl-2 overexpression on the expression of these isoforms and their binding to HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein. We found that both the hypoxic conditions and bcl-2 protein level of the cells did not modulate the expression of HSP90 $\alpha$  and HSP90 $\beta$  proteins (Figure 7A). We then investigated the effect of bcl-2 on the interaction between HIF-1 $\alpha$  and HSP90s proteins by immunoprecipitation of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein. As depicted in Figure 7B, Western blot analysis, using antibodies specifically recognizing the isoform  $\alpha$  or  $\beta$ , showed that HSP90 $\beta$ , but not HSP90 $\alpha$ , forms a complex with HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein in bcl-2 overexpressing cells exposed to hypoxia. To further validate the involvement of HSP90 proteins and to confirm the possibility that HSP90 $\beta$ , rather than  $\alpha$  isoform, is involved in HIF-1 $\alpha$  stabilization mediated by bcl-2 in hypoxia, HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression was evaluated in bcl-2 overexpressing cells after transfection with shRNA targeting the  $\alpha$  (shHSP90 $\alpha$ ) or the  $\beta$  (shHSP90 $\beta$ ) isoforms. As control, cells were transfected with scramble shRNA vector (shNC).

Western blot analysis confirmed the effective knockdown of the expression of each HSP90 target (Figure 7C,D). Moreover, the specificity of each shRNA against HSP90 was demonstrated by the absence of expression modulation of the other HSP90 isoform, verifying that both shRNAs were highly specific for their respective targets. Interestingly, Western blot analysis showed that shHSP90 $\beta$  (Figure 7C), but not shHSP90 $\alpha$  (Figure 7D), completely inhibited hypoxic induction of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein in bcl-2 overexpressing cells.

## Discussion

The bcl-2 protein is an inhibitor of apoptosis that has been recognized to play an important role also in a wide range of other biological processes, among which autophagy, DNA repair and drug resistance [21,30–32]. Recent studies, including ours, have demonstrated that bcl-2 also promotes tumour progression and angiogenesis of different tumour histotypes [13,16,33,34]. In this context, we have previously demonstrated that under hypoxic conditions the overexpression of bcl-2 in tumour cells is able to increase tumor angiogenesis enhancing the secretion of the pro-angiogenic factor VEGF, through the induction of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression and HIF-1 transcriptional activity [12,13].

In the present study, we investigated the mechanism by which bcl-2 regulates HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression in M14 melanoma cells under conditions strictly dependent on oxygen availability, such as hypoxia and high cell density. We demonstrated that HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein is required for bcl-2-induced VEGF expression under hypoxia by using a small interference approach. Moreover, we confirmed the capability of bcl-2 to modulate VEGF expression in several melanoma cells. We showed that also in high cell density conditions, which create a local pericellular hypoxic microenvironment, bcl-2 overexpression determines an increase of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression and HIF-1 transcriptional activity, similar to the ones obtained in hypoxia. Alternatively, bcl-2 is not able to cooperate with insulin or EGF to induce HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression under normoxia, highlighting that the capacity of bcl-



**Figure 7. HSP90 $\beta$  is the mediator of HIF-1 $\alpha$  induction by bcl-2 under hypoxic conditions.** (A) Western blot analysis of HSP90 $\alpha$  and HSP90 $\beta$  protein expression in M14 control (puro) and bcl-2 stably overexpressing (Bcl2/5, Bcl2/37) clones exposed to hypoxia or to normoxia for 24 h. (B) Analysis of HSP90 $\alpha$ /HIF-1 $\alpha$  and HSP90 $\beta$ /HIF-1 $\alpha$  interactions in the cells exposed to hypoxia for 24 h. Protein extracts were immunoprecipitated (IP) with anti-HIF-1 $\alpha$  and then Western blot analysis was performed using anti-HSP90 $\alpha$  and anti-HSP90 $\beta$  antibodies. (C,D) Western blot analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$ , HSP90 $\alpha$  and HSP90 $\beta$  protein expression in bcl-2 stably overexpressing cells transiently transfected with short hairpin construct targeting HSP90 $\beta$  (shHSP90 $\beta$ ), HSP90 $\alpha$  (shHSP90 $\alpha$ ) or with control vector (shNC) and exposed to hypoxia or to normoxia for 24 h. (A,C,D)  $\beta$ -actin protein amounts are used to check equal loading and transfer of proteins. (A–D) Western blot analyses representative of two independent experiments with similar results are shown.

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2 to regulate HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression strictly depends on oxygen availability.

We further identified HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein stabilization as a key mechanism for HIF-1 induction by bcl-2 under hypoxia. Our data demonstrated that bcl-2 under this condition affects HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein at the post-translational level, indeed the degradation rate of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein was faster in the control cells than in bcl-2 transfectants. Although under normoxia this HIF-1 $\alpha$  stabilization is not sufficient to affect the steady state levels of the protein, it becomes rate limiting during hypoxia or, in general, in conditions strictly dependent on oxygen level. In fact, we found that bcl-2 overexpression determines an increase of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein half-life also in high cell density conditions, as observed under hypoxia. The stabilization of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein in response to changes in oxygen concentration is achieved through the impairment of HIF-1 $\alpha$  ubiquitination and subsequent degradation of the protein. Generally, HIF-1 $\alpha$  is degraded in an oxygen-dependent manner through the activity of PHD2 enzyme, which hydroxylates HIF-1 $\alpha$  on proline residues 402 and 564, and this hydroxylated form is bound by the E3 ubiquitin ligase VHL which promotes HIF-1 $\alpha$  ubiquitination and its subsequent proteasomal degradation [19]. Notwithstanding, we found that bcl-2 regulates HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein stability in a prolyl hydroxylation-independent manner since bcl-2 overexpression had similar effects on either *wild type* protein and the degradation resistant form of HIF-1 $\alpha$ , which contains proline-to-alanine substitutions (P402A/P564A) triggering a resistance to PHD2-mediated hydroxylation. In agreement with this finding, in our experimental model PHD2 protein expression was upregulated in response to hypoxia at comparable levels in parental cells and bcl-2 overexpressing clones (data not shown). Further, bcl-2 overexpression had no impact on HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein stabilization induced by iron antagonists known to inhibit hydroxylase activity, such as Cobalt Chloride and Desferoxamine.

Some authors have reported that bcl-2 may reside, and even elicit a function, within the nucleus [21–23], modulating the transactivity of several transcription factors [35,36]. Here, we present evidence that in our experimental model the exogenous bcl-2 protein is also localized in the nucleus, beyond the cytoplasm. Of note, our results reveal, for the first time, that bcl-2 protein interacts with HIF-1 $\alpha$  in the nucleus, thus the pro-angiogenic effect of bcl-2 on HIF-1/VEGF axis may result from the nuclear localization of bcl-2. Since the HIF-1 $\alpha$ /bcl-2 complex can be observed in the nucleus, we can speculate that bcl-2-mediated stabilization of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein occurs in this cellular compartment. By dissecting the molecular mechanism of this process, we found that bcl-2 increases HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein stability through the involvement of the molecular chaperone HSP90, which was found to protect HIF-1 $\alpha$  from proteasomal degradation, even in VHL-deficient cells [37,38]. In this context, our data further indicate that the enhanced levels of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein in bcl-2 overexpressing clones may be due to a decreased polyubiquitination of HIF-1 $\alpha$  by enforcing the interaction between HIF-1 $\alpha$  and HSP90 protein. Moreover, we have shown not only a novel association of HIF-1 $\alpha$  with bcl-2, but we have also observed that bcl-2 is able to interact with HSP90 itself. Most importantly, we found that the interaction between bcl-2 and HIF-1 $\alpha$  proteins was not dependent on HSP90 inhibition, because the binding of bcl-2 and HIF-1 $\alpha$  was not reversed by the treatment with 17-AAG. In addition, sequential immunoprecipitation experiments demonstrated that bcl-2, HIF-1 $\alpha$  and HSP90 proteins may form a tri-complex which probably contributes to enhance HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein stability in bcl-2 overexpressing clones under hypoxia.

Here, we investigated the role of HSP90 $\alpha$  and HSP90 $\beta$  isoforms in bcl-2-mediated HIF-1 $\alpha$  induction under hypoxic condition. These two homologous proteins display some differences and elicit specific functions, such as differential binding to client proteins [28]. Using genetic approaches to specifically knockdown each HSP90 isoform in bcl-2 overexpressing cells, we found that HSP90 $\beta$ , but not HSP90 $\alpha$ , is required for HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein stabilization by bcl-2. Moreover, in agreement with these data, we found that only HSP90 $\beta$  binds HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein in bcl-2 overexpressing cells exposed to hypoxia. These results are in a good accordance with very recent data demonstrating an association between  $\beta$  isoform of HSP90 and bcl-2 protein in response to VEGF in leukemia cells [39] or to CpG oligodeoxynucleotide in macrophages [40]. All together, these results confirm that HSP90 $\beta$  is an important regulator of HIF-1 $\alpha$  stability and indicate that this molecular chaperone may be one of the mediators of bcl-2 pro-angiogenic function. A recent report demonstrated that RACK1 protein promotes ubiquitination of HIF-1 $\alpha$  induced by the HSP90 inhibitor 17-AAG and its subsequent VHL-independent proteasomal degradation competing with HSP90 for binding to PAS domain of HIF-1 $\alpha$  [2]. Notwithstanding, when exposing melanoma cells to the HSP90 inhibitor 17-AAG, we observed that bcl-2 overexpression counteracts both HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein degradation induced by 17-AAG, and the reduction of interaction between HIF-1 $\alpha$  and HSP90 induced by the inhibitor. Besides, we did not observe any difference in the HIF-1 $\alpha$  binding to RACK1 after forced expression of bcl-2 under hypoxia even after 17-AAG exposure (data not shown), suggesting that bcl-2 does not regulate RACK1/Elongin-C dependent HIF-1 $\alpha$  degradation pathways. So far we cannot exclude that other molecular players, such as HSP70, JNK1 and the COMMD1 proteins [41–43], may be modulated by bcl-2 and play a role in the stabilization process of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein mediated by bcl-2.

In conclusion, our study establishes a molecular link and highlights the possibility that bcl-2 is a new HIF-1 $\alpha$ -binding protein whose multivalent interactions are required for the stabilization of HIF-1 $\alpha$ , and that nuclear localization of bcl-2 may have an important role in protecting HIF-1 $\alpha$  from ubiquitination and proteasomal degradation that commences in the nucleus.

## Materials and Methods

### Cell cultures, hypoxia exposure, transfections and viral infection

Human melanoma cell lines were cultured in complete RPMI medium (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA). JR1, JR8, M14, PLF2 [44], and ASM-SC, bcl-2 overexpressing clones (Bcl2/5 and Bcl2/37) and a control clone (puro) derived from the M14 line after stable transfection, bcl-2 overexpressing (JR8/Bcl-2 and PLF2/Bcl-2) and control (JR8/puro, PLF2/puro) cells derived from the JR8 and PLF2 line after stable transfection were used. ASM-SC was cloned by limiting dilution from A375.S2 melanoma cell line (ATCC, Manassas, VA). For hypoxia exposure, culture dishes were placed in a hypoxia chamber allowing the formation of a hypoxic environment of 5% CO<sub>2</sub>, 95% N<sub>2</sub>. Unless stated otherwise, these hypoxic levels (1% of oxygen concentration, 24 h) was used in all experiments. For experiments under low or high cell density conditions, 100 cells/mm<sup>2</sup> or 700 cells/mm<sup>2</sup> were respectively plated and 24 h later cells were harvested and subjected to different assays.

The cells were stably or transiently transfected with the expression vector encoding the human *wild type* bcl-2. Transfec-

tions of expression vectors or RNA interference were performed as previously reported [44], using Lipofectamine (Invitrogen). SureSilencing shRNA plasmids against HSP90 $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  isoforms containing the hygromycin resistance gene were obtained from SABiosciences (Frederick, MD). Polyclonal population of stably transfected cells were used. Viruses were generated as previously described [45]. In short, the Phoenix amphotropic packaging line was transfected with the pBabe-based retroviral expression vectors carrying *wild type* (Addgene plasmid 19365) or hydroxylation-resistant (P402A/P564A) form (Addgene plasmid 19005) of HA-tagged HIF-1 $\alpha$ . Transfected cells were incubated for 48 h at 37°C for virus production. The virus-containing medium was collected, filtered and used to infect the target cells. Stable clones or mixed populations were cultured in the presence of puromycin (1  $\mu$ g/ml).

## Reagents

Cyclohexamide (CHX), Z-leu-leu-leu-CHO (MG132), Cobalt Chloride ( $\text{CoCl}_2$ ), Desferrioxamine (DFO), 17-Allylaminio-17-demethoxy-geldanamycin (17-AAG), insulin, Epidermal Growth Factor (EGF) were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MI, USA).

## Isolation of nuclear/cytoplasmic fractions

Nuclear and cytoplasmic fractions were prepared as follows: 1–2  $\times 10^6$  cells were resuspended in a hypotonic lysis buffer (10 mM HEPES pH 7.9, 10 mM KCl, 0.1 mM EDTA, 0.1 mM EGTA) containing protease inhibitors (Boehringer). After resuspension, NP-40 was added to a final concentration of 0.6% and the nuclei were isolated by centrifugation at 10,000 r.p.m. for 30 s at 4°C. After removing the supernatant (i.e. the cytoplasmic extract), the nuclei were re-suspended in a nuclear extract buffer (20 mM HEPES pH 7.9, 25% glycerol, 0.4 M NaCl, 0.1 mM EDTA, 0.1 mM EGTA), rocked for 15 min at 4°C and then recovered by centrifugation at 140,000 r.p.m. for 5 min at 4°C.

## Immunoprecipitation and Western blot analysis

For immunoprecipitation assays and Western blot analysis, the cells were lysed in 0.3% CHAPS buffer (40 mM HEPES [pH 7.5], 120 mM NaCl, 1 mM EDTA, 10 mM pyrophosphate, 10 mM glycerophosphate, 50 mM NaF, 1.5 mM  $\text{Na}_3\text{VO}_4$ , 0.3% CHAPS, and one tablet EDTA-free protease inhibitors [Roche] per 10 ml). Followed by centrifugation, the supernatant was precleared with protein A/G agarose beads coupled with mouse or rabbit IgG (Pierce, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Rockford, IL) for >2 h and then was exposed to 1  $\mu$ g of the antibody (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, CA) or mouse or rabbit IgG, as control, was added to each of the cellular lysates and incubated overnight at 4°C followed by incubation with protein A/G-agarose beads (Amersham Biosciences Europe, Milan, Italy) for 2 h at 4°C. Immunoprecipitates were washed four times in the lysis buffer before Western blotting analysis. For some immunoprecipitation experiments we used ExactaCruz™ reagents (Santa Cruz Biotechnology) to detect the bcl-2 protein without detection of the light chain of the immunoprecipitation antibody. Immunoprecipitation were also performed using multiple antibodies recognizing different epitopes on the bcl-2 (Santa Cruz Biotechnology) and HIF-1 $\alpha$  (Santa Cruz Biotechnology; Novus Biologicals, Littleton, CO) protein. Sequential immunoprecipitation experiments were performed incubating 2 mg of total cell lysate with antibody as for single immunoprecipitation, after washing the precipitated proteins were released with 1% SDS at 37°C for 30 minutes. Then, the eluate was diluted to a final concentration of 0.1% SDS with lysis buffer and immunoprecipitation was repeated with the supernatant with fresh beads and antibody.

For Western blot analysis, antibodies directed to HIF-1 $\alpha$ , HIF-1 $\beta$ , HSP90 (BD Pharmingen), HA epitope, ubiquitin (Santa Cruz Biotechnology), bcl-2 (Dako, Milan, Italy),  $\beta$ -tubulin (Thermo Scientific), HSP90 $\alpha$ , HSP90 $\beta$  (Abcam, Cambridge, UK), PHD2 (Novus Biologicals), Lamin A/C (Cell Signaling, Danvers, MA),  $\beta$ -actin (Sigma) were used.

## Pulse and pulse-chase assays

In the pulse assay, cells were incubated with methionine/cysteine-free serum-free DMEM (Invitrogen) for 2 h. [ $^{35}\text{S}$ ]-labeled methionine-cysteine (88  $\mu$ Ci/ml, EasyTag™ EXPRESS $^{35}\text{S}$  Protein Labeling Mix, PerkinElmer, Waltham, MA) was added to the medium and cells were collected after 15 and 45 min. In the pulse-chase assay, after 45 min pulse with [ $^{35}\text{S}$ ]-labeled methionine-cysteine, cells were washed three times with PBS, chased with DMEM containing 10% FBS and 2.5 mg/mL cold L-methionine and harvested after 15, 30, 45 and 60 min. Total protein lysates from pulse and pulse-chase assays were immunoprecipitated by HIF-1 $\alpha$  antibody. Radio-labeled HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein and the input cell lysates were subjected to SDS-PAGE. Gels were dried, exposed in phosphorImager cassette for 1–3 days and imaged using Personal Molecular Imager FX and Quantity One® software (Biorad Laboratories, Hercules, CA).

## ELISA

The supernatants were harvested and assayed for VEGF content by ELISA kit according to the manufacturer's instructions (R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN). VEGF levels were normalized to the number of adherent cells.

## Reporter gene assay

The cells were seeded in 24-well plates and were transfected with a total of 1  $\mu$ g of DNA/well using Lipofectamine reagent. The evaluation of HIF-1 transcriptional activity was performed as previously described [12] transfecting cells with a vector expressing luciferase under the control of 4X Hypoxia Responsive Element (HRE) and another one expressing  $\beta$ -galactosidase under the control of CMV promoter. The relative luciferase activity was calculated by luciferase/ $\beta$ -galactosidase ratios for each sample.

## Confocal analysis

After 24 h hypoxic conditions exposure, cells were fixed in 100% methyl alcohol for 10 min at –20°C and then incubated with primary antibodies. The cells were incubated with TRITC conjugated Goat anti-Rabbit and/or FITC conjugated Goat anti-Mouse (Jackson Lab, West Grove, PA). Nuclei were visualized using TO-PRO3® (Invitrogen). The images were scanned under a  $\times 40$  oil immersion objective and to avoid bleed-through effects, each dye was scanned independently by a Leica confocal microscope (laser-scanning TCS SP2) equipped with Ar/ArKr and HeNe lasers. The images were acquired and electronically merged utilizing the Leica confocal software (Leica Microsystems Heidelberg GmbH, Mannheim, Germany). Figures were processed using Adobe PhotoShop software.

## Densitometric analysis

Developed films were acquired using GS-700 Imaging Densitometer (Biorad) and processed with Corel Photo Paint 7.0 to adjust image brightness and contrast. Densitometric evaluation was performed using Molecular Analyst Software (Biorad) and normalized with relative controls depending on the analysis performed.

## Statistical Analysis

Differences between groups were analyzed with a two-sided paired or unpaired Student's *t* test by use of GraphPad Prism 3.00 (GraphPadSoftware, San Diego, CA). Results were considered to be statistically significant if  $p < 0.05$ . Experiments were usually repeated three times unless indicated otherwise.

## Supporting Information

**Figure S1** HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein is required for VEGF induction by bcl-2 in melanoma cells under hypoxia. (A) Western blot analysis of bcl-2 protein expression in whole extracts and (B) ELISA assay of VEGF protein in conditioned medium in several human melanoma cell lines exposed to normoxia and hypoxia for 24 h, after transient transfection with control (empty) or bcl-2 expressing vector (Bcl-2). (C) Western blot analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$  and HIF-1 $\beta$  protein expression in total extracts and (D) ELISA assay of VEGF protein in conditioned medium in M14 cells stably transfected with control (puro) or bcl-2 expression vector (Bcl2/5) after transfection with siRNA directed against HIF-1 $\alpha$  (siHIF-1 $\alpha$ ) or unrelated control mRNA (siNC) and then exposed to normoxia or hypoxia for 24 h. (A,C)  $\beta$ -actin protein amounts are used to check equal loading and transfer of proteins. Western blot analyses representative of two independent experiments with similar results are shown. (B,D) Results represent the mean  $\pm$  SD of 3 independent experiments performed in triplicate. Fold induction of secreted VEGF protein relative to normoxia.

\*  $p < 0.01$

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**Figure S2** Bcl-2 cooperates with high cell density conditions to induce nuclear HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein and HIF-1 transactivation activity. (A) Western blot analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$  and HIF-1 $\beta$  protein expression in cytoplasmic (Cyto) and nuclear (Nucl) protein extracts of M14 control (puro) and bcl-2 overexpressing (Bcl2/5, Bcl2/37) cells plated under low (sparse) or high (dense) cell density condition.  $\beta$ -actin protein amounts are used to check equal loading and transfer of proteins. Western blot analysis representative of two independent experiments with similar results are shown. (B) HRE transcriptional activity of the cells cultured under sparse or dense conditions. Results represent the mean  $\pm$  SD of 3

independent experiments performed in triplicate. Fold induction relative to sparse condition. \*  $p < 0.01$

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**Figure S3** Bcl-2 promotes HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein stability in high cell density conditions. Western blot analysis (panel left) and quantification (panel right) of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression in total lysates of melanoma control (puro) and bcl-2 overexpressing (Bcl2/5, Bcl2/37) cells cultured under high cell density conditions (dense) and then treated with Cyclohexamide (CHX, 50  $\mu$ g/ml) for the indicated times.  $\beta$ -actin protein amounts are used to check equal loading and transfer of proteins. Western blot analysis representative of two independent experiments with similar results are shown. Densitometric analysis (panel right) of the relative Western blot (panel left) was performed using Molecular Analyst Software and normalized with relative controls depending on the analysis performed.

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**Figure S4** Bcl-2 does not cooperate with hypoxic mimetic compounds to induce HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression. Western blot analysis of HIF-1 $\alpha$  protein expression in total lysates of M14 control (puro) and bcl-2 overexpressing (Bcl2/5, Bcl2/37) cells exposed to desferrioxamine (DFO, 50  $\mu$ M) or Cobalt Chloride (CoCl<sub>2</sub>, 100  $\mu$ M) for 3 h.  $\beta$ -actin protein amounts are used to check equal loading and transfer of proteins. Western blot analyses representative of two independent experiments with similar results are shown.

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## Author Contributions

Conceived and designed the experiments: DT DDB. Performed the experiments: DT CG MD. Analyzed the data: DT CG EZ GZ DDB. Contributed reagents/materials/analysis tools: EZ GZ DDB. Wrote the paper: DT DDB.

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