

Draft Opening Statement
H.E. Mr. Behzad Saberi Ansari, Deputy Secretary General
5th High-Level Experts Group Meeting
24-25 November 2025
Istanbul, Republic of Türkiye

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Honourable Representatives of ECO Member States,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the 5th High-Level Experts Group Meeting on Trade, Investment, and Related Matters. Allow me, first of all, to express our sincere gratitude to the Government of the Republic of Türkiye for hosting this important gathering in the historic and vibrant city of Istanbul, and for the excellent arrangements made for the smooth organization of both this meeting and the upcoming 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade.

Excellencies,

Distinguished Colleagues,

This meeting holds particular institutional significance. As you know, the original mandate of this gathering was that of the Senior Officials Meeting for the 5th Ministerial Meeting. However, following careful consideration, and with a view to strengthening the preparatory process for Ministerial engagements, the Secretariat, upon the approval of the Council of Permanent Representatives, has restructured this platform under the title of the High-Level Experts Group (HLEG).

This adjustment reflects our intention to institutionalize the HLEG as a standing technical forum that:

- supports the work of the Trade Ministers,
- ensures better continuity between technical deliberations and political decision-making, and

- provides Member States with a dedicated mechanism for sustained dialogue on the full spectrum of trade, customs and investment matters.

In the years ahead, we envision that every Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade will be preceded by a regular HLEG session, ensuring more rigorous technical preparation and more informed Ministerial decisions.

Excellencies,

It is worth recalling that the previous HLEG meeting took place two decades ago. Much has changed since then. Many agenda items from that time have either been completed, overtaken by new realities, or replaced by priorities better aligned with the evolving global and regional economic landscape.

This evolution demonstrates both continuity and progress. Particularly over the last three years, we have witnessed renewed political commitment and intensified technical engagement across the board. I am pleased to say that the ECO trade agenda has matured considerably. What was once conceptual or aspirational is now increasingly technical, operational, and, in many areas, ready for negotiation or implementation.

Over the last nine months alone, the Secretariat has been able to secure quorum for a number of trade or customs-related meetings in less than a week, which is a development that was not possible for many years in several thematic areas of ECO cooperation.

We have observed:

- More active and responsive national focal points,
- Higher levels of participation across working groups, and
- Clearer, more frequent and direct communication channels between Member States and the Secretariat.

Such responsiveness is a clear demonstration of ownership, trust, and a shared understanding that strengthening trade, connectivity, and customs cooperation is in everyone's mutual interest. These are the indispensable foundations of successful regional integration.

Excellencies,

This 5th High-Level Experts Group (HLEG) Meeting provides us with a vital opportunity to finalize the technical groundwork ahead of the 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade, scheduled for 26 November. Your deliberations over these two days will directly shape the decisions that our Honourable Ministers will consider, particularly on ECOTA modernization, new trade facilitation instruments, and updated cooperation mechanisms.

The agenda before you is comprehensive, forward-looking, and ambitious. So, please allow me to briefly highlight some of its central components:

First, we will begin with a concise review of the relevant decisions of the ECO Summits, the Council of Foreign Ministers, the previous Ministerial Meetings on Commerce and Foreign Trade, as well as earlier HLEG and ECOTA Cooperation Council meetings. I believe this will be a valuable exercise, not only to identify gaps, but also to appreciate the significant progress that has been achieved.

Excellencies,

At the heart of our work lies the modernization of the ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA). As you know, the Secretariat has recently completed an updated research study and prepared a Draft ECOTA Negotiation Strategy and Roadmap. These documents are based on extensive data, consultations, and technical assessments, and they are intended to guide Member States in re-shaping ECOTA into an agreement that is simpler, more balanced, and fully operational.

Your expert guidance on these documents will be essential as the Ministers consider the establishment of the Technical Negotiation Committee (TNC) to drive the re-negotiation process forward in 2026.

Following our ECOTA discussions, we will turn to the Trade Facilitation agenda, including the:

- ECO Trade Facilitation Strategy, and
- Draft ECO Trade Facilitation Agreement (ETFA).

These instruments form another pillar of our collective efforts to make regional trade more predictable, transparent, and efficient.

At this juncture, I would like to recall that that ECO Trade Facilitation Strategy has already been adopted by the 10th Meeting of the Heads of Customs Administrations on May 28, 2025 in Tehran. Accordingly, it is now ready to be submitted to the Ministers for their final approval on November 26.

Distinguished Delegates,

We have before us two more concrete success stories, developed jointly by our customs and trade promotion communities:

1. The ECO Agreement on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters, and
2. The Memorandum of Understanding on Joint Trade Promotion Activities.

Both instruments have already been open for signature for several months. During this meeting, we can review which Member States may be ready to sign them. I sincerely hope that these important instruments will receive due reference in your internal national documents and correspondence, so that they may soon translate into practical cooperation, particularly in customs coordination, export promotion, business matchmaking, and SME support.

I strongly believe that our Member States could collectively design practical, results-oriented work flows under these two instruments with direct and measurable impact on exports, SMEs, and regional business linkages.

Another promising avenue is the Network of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and Free Trade Zones (FTZs). This initiative can significantly enhance investment cooperation within the ECO region, and I hope the HLEG may provide guidance on how best to consolidate and operationalize this network.

Excellencies,

Capacity building remains an indispensable element for advancing meaningful and sustainable trade reforms. This is precisely where technical work can evolve into implementable and funded programs. Over the coming two days, the HLEG will review several important items, including:

- the ECO-UNIDO Quality Infrastructure Project,
- potential funding arrangements through the ECOTA Implementation Fund,
- possible support by the ECO Trade and Development Bank, and

- the engagement of additional development partners.

We would also greatly appreciate your guidance on how to strengthen private sector cooperation, and on shaping the strategic direction of ECO's trade and investment agenda within the new framework titled: "Strategic Goals of Economic Cooperation 2035."

Finally, we will work on the Draft Istanbul Declaration and the Draft Ministerial Report, which will be presented to the Ministers on 26 November. The quality, clarity, and direction of these documents will rely heavily on your deliberations and consensus-building over these two days.

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Your deliberations today and tomorrow are not simply technical discussions. They represent a collective effort to bring the ECO region closer to a more integrated, competitive, and opportunity-driven economic space.

The renewed engagement we have witnessed over recent months is truly encouraging. But momentum must now be sustained, through closer coordination, timely feedback, active focal point participation, and strong ownership at both national and ministerial levels. These elements are essential if we are to translate our shared vision into meaningful and lasting results.

On behalf of the ECO Secretariat, I reaffirm our full commitment to supporting you at every stage of this process, technically, procedurally, and institutionally. We stand ready to facilitate your work, respond to your needs, and ensure that this platform continues to evolve as an effective mechanism for regional cooperation.

I wish you all productive, constructive, and forward-looking deliberations. May the work of this meeting lay a strong and coherent technical foundation for the success of the 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade.

Thank you very much.